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Visual Narratives of Suicide: Gendering Virtue and Agency in the Late Italian Renaissance, circa 1550-1650

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Visual Narratives of Suicide:
Gendering Virtue and Agency in the Late Italian Renaissance, Circa 1550-1650

by

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Dedication

For my parents, Char and Ted, but mostly my dog, Ismene.

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Abstract

Visual Narratives of Suicide: Gendering Virtue and Agency in the Late Italian Renaissance, circa 1550-1650

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Images of suicide proliferated during the hundred-year period from the mid-Cinquecento to the mid-Seicento; typically, these depicted eroticized Lucretias or Cleopatras, climactically succumbing to their self-inflicted wounds. While scholars sometimes explain away these suicidal subjects as nothing more than titillating confections of male desire, I find that they offer critical insights into the Zeitgeist of the Late Italian Renaissance. Furthermore, representations of suicide from this period have yet to be considered comprehensively; this study is an attempt to remedy that oversight, incorporating a wide range of images with rich iconographies that offer far more than eroticism. As my title suggests, the corpus of images of "self-murder" is inextricably tied to gender: specifically, gendered notions of virtue and agency. Next to the mountain of female suicides in images from this period, there is a mere scattering of male suicides. The

first of three sections in this thesis examines that small subset of male subjects, turning to paintings of Judas Iscariot and Cato the Younger, whose deaths exemplify masculine vice and virtue, respectively. Next, I consider the sixteenth-century shift in representations of classical female suicides from moralizing exemplars of chastity to the ambiguous, eroticized abstractions that became so appealing to artists and patrons alike. Unlike the preceding sections, the final third of this study focuses on female-authored depictions of suicide. Anchored by several key works painted by Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani, I create a dialogue between male and female subjects, as well as male and female artists. With this threefold approach, depictions of suicide emerge as microcosms of late Renaissance conceptions of gender, virtue, and agency.

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Introduction

Judging from the multitude of suicidal figures in the art and literature of Late Renaissance Europe, one might assume that such deaths had become an epidemic. Recorded suicides are scant, however; there is little documentation to suggest that there was any such "outbreak" during this period. [1] So, if the subject does not reflect a historical phenomenon, then it must reflect a keen cultural interest in self-murder, whether in specific historical instances, or in the metaphorical value of suicide for expressing insoluble dilemmas of virtue. In "Visual Narratives of Suicide," I address the gendered ambivalence in the artistic, and to some extent literary, representations of suicide that proliferated between 1550 and 1650. Using gender as a tool for historical analysis draws out meaningful distinctions among these works, quickly establishing one foundational difference: images of men committing self-murder are quite rare in comparison to the wealth of suicidal female subjects. The male-focused pieces that do exist, however, are readily decipherable: these men are depicted as either craven villains or magnificent heroes, with few apparent exceptions. Portrayals of their female counterparts, on the other hand, are cloaked in ambiguity. They are at once fallen women, seductresses, martyrs, heroines, and exemplars of virtue. I intend to elucidate these apparent dichotomies within and between genders by placing representations of male suicide and of female suicide in direct dialogue with one another. Through such comparison, I clarify how gendered concepts of "masculine" and "feminine" behavior were applied to voluntary

[1] Historians such as Georges Minois posit that suicides per capita are comparable to what has been observed over the following centuries. See: Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, Medicine & Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). Sharon Strocchia has written about the seemingly high suicide rates inside convents relative to the rates of self-murder in the general population. She argues that suicide in these convents was far more prevalent than we find in records, and far more significant than historians have yet acknowledged. See: Sharon T. Strocchia, "Women on the Edge: Madness, Possession, and Suicide in Early Modern Convents," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 45, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): 53–77.

death in the Late Renaissance. Further, the dialogue of male and female images leads me to identify an emergent fluidity in gendered representations of suicide. I speculate as to what that fluidity might mean.

Brief Historical and Cultural Context

The artistic preoccupation with suicide in the Late Renaissance is substantiated by contemporary debates on the ethics of self-murder, as well as by laws governing the management of the deceased's estate and even of the corpse itself – for suicide was not just a sin, but a crime as well.[2] The actual treatment of "self-murderers" varied according to social status and suspected motive, though bodies were often dragged through the streets, publicly hanged after the fact, and buried in unconsecrated ground; families left behind were also dispossessed of the deceased's estate. And yet, this widespread cultural attention to suicide did not engender unified attitudes toward the issue, either in theory or in practice. To begin, Christian doctrine condemned suicide as a mortal sin, and did so in no uncertain terms. This condemnation is conveyed nicely by Dante, who reserves the seventh circle of hell not just for sinners who committed acts of violence toward others, but also for those who committed acts of violence toward *themselves.*[3] Giotto's fresco of personified vices in the Scrovegni Chapel portray "Despair" (or *Desperatio*) as a woman hanging herself; a small demon hovers near her head, symbolizing the devil's influence and foreshadowing the torment that awaits her in Hell **[Fig. 1**]. The revival of classical—and therefore, pagan—ideals in the Renaissance complicated and sometimes directly contradicted this Catholic censure. In

[2] Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, Medicine & Culture (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).
[3] Their forms of eternal punishment differ to fit this distinction. See: Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation, Bilingual Edition*, trans. Robert Pinsky, Bilingual edition (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), Cantos XII and XIII.

Greek and Roman antiquity, resolving certain situations with suicide was considered appropriate, even heroic.[4] In the wake of humiliation, disgrace, misfortune, or defeat, choosing death was a noble path that signified personal redemption and salvaged public reputation. Ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle—whose works were rediscovered, newly translated into both Latin and vernaculars, and widely circulated in print during the Renaissance—argued that it was generally wrong and cowardly to kill oneself, but that under the right circumstances, self-murder was justified.[5] Criteria for committing the righteous suicide were evidently vague in ancient Rome before becoming rigidly "clear" in the Middle Ages, when the concept was extinguished altogether.[6] During the subsequent transition to the Early Modern era, the ambivalent attitudes of antiquity began seeping back into the cultural fabric of Renaissance Italy, thus initiating the vilification and glorification that we find entangled in images of suicide.

Chapter One – "To take arms against a sea of troubles": Vice, Virtue, and Masculinity

The first of my three chapters explores how visualizations of male suicide, or their absence, functioned as exemplars of either vice or virtue for their Renaissance audience. Judas Iscariot is one such exemplar of vice. However, while Judas is the quintessential sinner, and his is the

4 Benjamin Russell Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin: Images of Suicide in Medieval Art," 2014, https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/15215: pg. 24.

5 Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, 349 BC, Book III, vii. 5-13, 1115a-1116a; Book V, xi, 1138a, ed. and tr. W. D. Ross. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1925, pp. 155-163, 317-319; Plato, *Laws IX*, 360 BC, 854a3–5.

6 One might argue that Jesus Christ's death was voluntary and thus an example of righteous suicide accepted during the Middle Ages. I would contend that labeling Christ's death an outright "suicide" would have been blasphemous. The nature of Jesus's death and the related topic of martyrdom (in regard to both ancient and contemporary, religious and political figures such as Socrates, Joan of Arc, Thomas More) require nuanced consideration and are therefore beyond the scope of this study. See especially: Candida R. Moss, "The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern," *Church History* 81, no. 3 (2012): 531–51; Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin," pages 39-48. See also: Ali Mazrui, "Sacred Suicide," *Transition*, no. 21 (1965): 10–15.

quintessentially sinful suicide, his demise barely appears in the art of the Late Renaissance; almost all extant examples were produced before 1500. While I will reference some earlier depictions of Judas's death, later pieces would be more convenient for purposes of visual comparison with female counterparts. The dearth of such material from the Late Renaissance is revealing in itself and invites a different, though equally fruitful, method of comparison. I suspect that the absence of depictions of Judas's suicide reflects mores shifting along with artistic trends.

Cato the Younger's suicide, however, received an entirely different artistic treatment and elicited a different response from the contemporary viewer; Cato functions as my primary example of the virtuous alternative. There are not a great many artworks featuring Cato, but in the period from 1550-1650 there are notably more than Judas. The Catos that do survive present a uniform image of an ancient hero, a man who chose to die for his exemplary moral and political convictions. Judas, largely because of his suicide, was emasculated and rejected by society, while Cato, because of ancient and *in spite* of contemporary notions of suicide, was masculine and heroic.

Chapter Two – Moralizing, Eroticizing, and Undermining Female Suicides

In this chapter, I discuss images of female suicide, seeking to determine what they reveal about constructions of femininity. The period's indisputable preference for visualizing women committing suicide over men can be explained by dissecting the layers of visual and narrative cues. One such layer reveals an opportunity for moralizing. Exemplars of virtue such as Lucretia, Virginia, and Dido were pillars of the artistic realm of female worthies.[7] Their legendary displays of chastity and familial loyalty earned them sympathetic, if not always autonomous, representations—at least up until the mid-Cinquecento when there was a dramatic shift; I illustrate

[7] Dido's exemplarity is quite complicated, as we will see in Chapter Two.

the shift from primarily virtuous to primarily erotic subjects with images from before and after this pivotal moment. Female exemplars were progressively eroticized; their physical beauty usurped the larger narratives of their lives. The iconography was compressed: a painting might include nothing more than the "self-murder weapon" and maybe one other detail identifying the suffering figure.

The increasing emphasis on the figures' sexuality was accompanied by the impression of emotional and physical fragility. Both elements "weakened" the figures, making them vulnerable to the male gaze. The images reassured the male viewer of his masculinity; he was reminded of his entitlement to control women's sexuality and of his comparative physical and mental supremacy. Thus, the visual subtext reinforced his position at the top of the social hierarchy while obscuring the concept of ideal feminine virtue. Whatever fluctuating agency classical heroines had possessed as artistic subjects was now replaced with consistently passive eroticism. While the figures are undeniably passive, however, I view the eroticizing process as a complication of virtue, not an inherent negation, as some scholars claim.[8]

Chapter Three – The *Virtuosa* and Her Subject: Autonomy Revitalized, Femininity Redefined

Whereas my first two chapters establish that many representations of suicide are byproducts of Renaissance views on differences between male and female psychology, biology, societal roles, and gender-appropriate virtues, my final chapter addresses artists who transcended those confines to reclaim agency for their subjects. Perhaps none did this more effectively than Artemisia Gentileschi in her earliest *Lucretia* (c. 1621). I intend to show how this figure in

8 Mary D. Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, Reprint edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).

particular, by virtue of Gentileschi's adept handling, is imbued with stereotypically masculine qualities. Quite unlike Cambiaso's version (c. 1565), this *Lucretia* is substantial and contemplative; she rejects the male gaze. She has far more in common with Guercino's *Cato* in their shared bearing of conscious determination; neither exhibits the emotional irrationality of Cambiaso's figure. Elisabetta Sirani's similarly pioneering depictions of female agency, also included in the discussion, reinforce such observations. Carlo Cesare Malvasia, Elisabetta Sirani's biographer and contemporary, describes her manner of painting as "virile"; through it she "virtually acquired the male sex."[9] I argue that Sirani and Gentileschi infuse many of their heroines with this same so-called virility. By engaging this corpus of transgressive images by female artists, I show how the *virtuosa's* perspective played a pivotal role in portraying female agency, an agency most irrefutably visible in death.

State of the Field

While histories of suicide in Europe do exist, there are not a great many, and none devoted exclusively to the Italian Renaissance. Among the more helpful examples are Alexander Murray's *Suicide in the Middle Ages* (Vol. I, 1998; Vol. II, 2003) which, although historically premature, provide a foundation for comparison with the following centuries. Georges Minois's *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture* (1999) offers more general insight into the realities and evolution of suicide. "The Ethics of Suicide in the Renaissance and Reformation" (1989), by Gary B. Ferngren, also contributes to the discussion of moral and religious attitudes toward self-murder; of particular use to me is Ferngren's identification of the moment when these two attitudes

[9] Quotation for Carlo Cesare Malvasia given in: Babette Bohn, "From Oxymoron to Virile Paintbrush," in *A Companion to Renaissance and Baroque Art*, ed. Babette Bohn and James M. Saslow (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 240.

ceased to be mutually inclusive. In the scholarship on suicide in literature, there is one book purely on Italian works – *The Last Cross: A History of the Suicide Theme in Italian Literature* (1981) by Daniel Rolfs; unfortunately, it takes a narrow, linear, and rather superficial approach to the subject.

Art history's treatment of the suicide trope in early modern Italy has been similarly limited. Scholarship in this realm gravitates toward portrayals of a single figure (such as Dido), themes within a single artist's oeuvre (such as Artemisia Gentileschi), or, more commonly, a single work (such as Mantegna's *Dido* or Raphael's *Lucretia*). One notable exception is Ron Brown's *Art of Suicide (Picturing History)* (2001). Brown takes a comprehensive, and necessarily cursory, look at suicide as it has been portrayed in Western art from antiquity to the present day. To supplement limited research explicitly devoted to suicide in art, I rely on the abundance of equally relevant scholarship devoted to gender, death, and sex in the Renaissance. Feminist approaches to art history, such as Laura Mulvey's and Linda Nochlin's foundational texts, help structure my own approach. Babette Bohn's works are also critical, in particular "From Oxymoron to Virile Paintbrush" (2013) where she discusses how Elisabetta Sirani transcends traditional limitations put on female artists through clever and bold innovation. The works of Mary D. Garrard, Margaret Franklin, Fredrika Jacobs, Sharon Strocchia, and Cristelle Baskins are also of especial benefit to this study—although I take issue with some of their arguments. Each has authored texts on key subjects such as Renaissance notions of gender and honor, portrayals of antique heroines, the rise of female artists in the seventeenth century, gender ideals in the iconography of *cassoni* (marriage chests), and Boccaccio's influential writings about famous women.

Chapter One
"To take arms against a sea of troubles": Vice, Virtue, and Masculinity

Introduction

The paucity of representations depicting male suicide in art is remarkable when one considers the number of well-known figures from antiquity, not to mention those found in contemporary Renaissance texts, that could have served as inspiration. The marked preference for visualizing female suicides drawn from comparable source material can be interpreted in several ways, which I introduce in the concluding sections and examine further in my second chapter. In this first chapter, I examine how masculinity was conceived in the Late Renaissance, and how these conceptions shaped portrayals of suicide, or, more often, the absence of such portrayals. Vice and virtue were not simply vice and virtue; both positive and negative qualities were gendered. The ideal man was magnanimous, just, and courageous, while the ideal woman was temperate, chaste, and obedient.[10] The noteworthy trend here is that men display virtue actively, while women are more likely to do so passively. It could also be said that male behavior was easier to classify and more clearly defined than female behavior, though we will see that this notion of clarity can be disputed. Elements of that ease in classification, however, harken back to classical villains and heroes, each of whom possessed distinct traits: the viewer is able to identify quickly the hierarchy of virtues governing the representations.

Judas Iscariot: Vice and Emasculation

Judas Iscariot is the quintessential example of the ancient villain, infamous for his greed, treachery, and cowardice. Judas, according to the New Testament, was one of the original twelve

[10] Elizabeth Storr Cohen and Thomas Vance Cohen, *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001), 90-92.

disciples of Jesus Christ. It was he who betrayed Christ in exchange for money, leading to the latter's capture and crucifixion. Narratives of his fate differ slightly even within the biblical canon, appearing twice in the New Testament. The Gospel of Matthew explains that Judas returned the pieces of silver that he had received as payment for his treachery, verbally acknowledging his sin and his guilt as he did so; he then hanged himself. [11] In Acts of the Apostles, alternatively, Peter proclaims that Judas kept the bribe and used it to purchase a plot of land—"the Field of Blood."[12] It was thus named when Judas tripped in the field, causing his body to burst and his bowels to rush forth. The "split tradition" of Judas's death, as Alexander Murray has dubbed it, materialized early in the iconography, as we shall soon see.[13]

Regardless of the manner of Judas's death, both accounts allege that Judas died on the same day that Jesus was crucified. While the act of suicide could be interpreted as a pious demonstration of repentance, a self-imposed punishment for his sins, that interpretation was not traditional. From a theological perspective, by choosing suicide Judas only commits another sin, and does so out of vice—cowardice and the same despair that Giotto captures in the Arena Chapel fresco. The lack of faith that Judas exhibits in despairing of God's forgiveness equates to unbelief, making his final sin heresy.[14] Dante's judgment of Judas also reflects this viewpoint. In Canto 34 of the *Inferno*, he reserves the very worst torment for Judas, who is doomed to an eternity of being chewed in the central maw of polycephalous Lucifer.[15] This punishment is carried out in the fourth ring of the ninth circle of hell, the deepest of all (fittingly called *Judecca*), and of Lucifer's three heads, the middle one is the most savage. Dante thus presents Judas as the most damnable figure in the history

[11] Gospel of Matthew 27:3-5.
[12] Acts of the Apostles 1:16-20.
[13] Alexander Murray, Suicide in the Middle Ages Volume 2: The Curse on Self-Murder (OUP Oxford, 2011), 95.
[14] Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin," 17.
[15] Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXIV.

of humankind, and although his primary sin is betrayal rather than suicide, Dante leaves no doubt that suicide is the kind of death befitting the ultimate exemplar of vice.[16] This correlation is supported by Judas's two flanking sufferers: Brutus and Cassius. These men betrayed Julius Caesar, just as Judas betrayed Jesus Christ. Significantly, both committed suicide following their own military defeats. While the commonality in the three sinners' manner of death might not be emphasized, it nevertheless cements the notion that treachery and suicide go hand in hand.

Artistic depictions of Judas tell much the same story. In Florence's Baptistry of San Giovanni, the section of the vault mosaic depicting the Last Judgment includes a hanged Judas, clearly labeled "Giuda" (13th c.) **[Fig. 2]**. The figure is strung up on a tree branch with a rope kept forever taut by the demon who pulls it. Judas's inclusion is significant here because of the scene's relative visibility, placed on the lowest register of the vault, as well as the baptistry's purpose as a site of purification and great prominence within the city. The magnificent ceiling commands attention, and evidently, Judas's punishment is integral to the program and the viewer's experience. Indeed, he is the only identifiable figure in Hell. Additionally, it is plausible that the singling out of Judas, not to mention the depiction of Satan and the two serpents emerging from his ears, all three chewing on some unfortunate sinner **[Fig. 3]**, influenced Dante's own imagining of *Judecca*.[17]

We find another telling example in Giotto's Judas, depicted in the very same Arena Chapel as the personified virtues and vices (such as *Desperatio*) **[Fig. 4]**. Giotto completed these frescos circa 1305, likely around the time the Baptistry ceiling was finished, and less than twenty years before Dante finished his literary masterpiece in 1320. In a cycle depicting the life of Christ, Giotto

[16] Primary in the sense that his greed and betrayal are stressed far more frequently than his suicide, at least in visual narratives. See: Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin," 55.
[17] Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 34, 297-99.

includes the scene where Judas makes his fateful pact, collecting his reward in advance for the betrayal of the son of God. In his hand is the moneybag, and just behind him we see a large demon lurking; his grasp on Judas's arm indicates Satan's wicked hold over the man. Above the entrance to the chapel is a large Last Judgment scene, in which Judas is once again discernible amidst the chaos **[Fig. 5]**. Though other figures hang from ropes in small groups in the scene, he hangs from his own small ledge, isolated and identifiable by the exposed viscera spilling from his body. As we may recall, this last feature is only described in one version of events where the belly is supposedly ruptured due to a fall; the suicide by hanging is a separate narrative. To make sense of the differing accounts, a sort of compromise was reached, where Judas hangs himself but falls from the tree because the rope or branch snaps. The impact supposedly results in the second injury. In Giotto's depiction, as in the next few that I examine, Judas has clearly taken no gut-splitting fall, and yet he exhibits the wound as if he had. There is no explanation for this arresting detail in the narrative depicted, so the inclusion must be meant to guarantee the identification of Judas and to emphasize further the horrific, abominable nature of his death. By inserting a recognizable figure into his hellscape, Giotto enables the viewer to draw a direct connection between the personified vice of despair and Judas's own sinful actions depicted nearby. He develops a narrative continuity to convey the relationship between crime and punishment.

Shortly thereafter, Pietro Lorenzetti (c. 1280-1348) painted a mural on the walls of San Francesco in Assisi, featuring a Passion cycle also complete with a hanging Judas **[Fig. 6]**. This particular section of the fresco is in poor condition, but adequately legible for our purposes. The figure of Judas hangs from a wooden beam in an archway, eyes closed, neck unnaturally serpentine, and bowels once again exposed. This time the setting is not infernal—there are no hovering demons present—but the message is clear enough: "Should any [Franciscan] friar still

feel his moral certainties wavering, he has only to turn to the *Death of Judas*, where the eviscerated corpse of the apostate will meet his gaze in perpetual and silent rebuke."[18] His is the cautionary tale chosen to frighten viewers into lives of piety, especially those who have taken a sacred oath to do so.

A century and a half later, Piedmontese priest and artist Giovanni Canavesio (1450-1500) contributed to the conversation with a fresco in a pilgrimage chapel called Notre-Dame des Fontaines, then part of the Duchy of Savoy, now on the French border of modern-day Italy. This artist's depiction of Judas is shocking, reducing the previous renditions to comparative subtlety **[Fig. 7].** The figure now hangs from a tree rather than a beam; his skin is unnaturally sallow, with a greenish tinge to it, and his face intensely distorted into a hideous, terrified grimace. His tongue sticks out between his teeth as he appears to look down, wide-eyed, at his mutilated body. Canavesio does not merely show Judas's intestines exiting his body, but exposes his entire chest cavity – not so much as if his body had "burst," but as if someone had cut away a circle of flesh from the base of his sternum to his pelvis and pulled out everything within.[19] Emerging from the dangling viscera is a small, nude figure that represents Judas's soul; he is being seized by a hairy demon not much larger than himself. The demon in Giotto's *Desperatio* serves the same function, though its role is demonstrated more explicitly here. The demon sprays blood from all of his facial orifices, and a second face on his lower body most noticeably spews blood directly at the little soul. The unusual level of gore, grotesque appearance of the corpse, and unambiguous retrieval of

18 Janet Robson, "Judas and the Franciscans: Perfidy Pictured in Lorenzetti's Passion Cycle at Assisi," *The Art Bulletin* 86, no. 1 (2004), 53.

19 Veronique Plesch, *Painter and Priest: Giovanni Canavesio's Visual Rhetoric and The Passion Cycle at La Brigue*, 1 edition (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 215. Plesch theorizes that such gore may have been known to Canavesio (and his audience) in real life. The Passion was performed in plays, and for Judas's suicide, actors would use real sheep guts as a prop, potentially lending realism to Canavesio's depiction.

the sinner's soul all speak to the magnitude of late medieval Catholic loathing toward Judas and the inviting opportunity for artists to bring his torment to life. Canavesio communicates to the viewer what cannot be described in words as forcefully, perhaps, as it can be shown: God's punishment is swift, visceral, and merciless.

Véronique Plesch argues that Judas is integral to the entire cycle at Notre Dame des Fontaines, holding particular narrative significance.[20] Indeed, it is highly unusual to include all three major episodes of the Judas subplot (the pact, his remorse, and his death), as Canavesio does.[21] The artist's dual experience as priest and painter lent him a unique perspective that is reflected in his intense focus on Judas: horrific comeuppance awaits any individual who betrays his faith. The image is placed right next to the Crucifixion scene—a juxtaposition that intentionally creates a rivalry between Judas and Jesus for the viewer's attention **[Fig. 8]**.[22] Jesus on the cross is transcendent and demands reverence, but the scene is also eminently familiar. Judas's freakish corpse, in contrast, is striking in its novelty, eliciting the viewer's morbid fascination. Jesus is spiritually as well as physically distant, depicted high up on the wall, far above the viewer. Judas, on the other hand, is on the lower register, as close as possible to the viewer, his sins weighing him down to the base level of humanity. What's more, his fate is further emphasized by his position just below a window—originally *the* window, rather, as it was the only light source that illuminated the nave at the time of its creation.[23] The latter image functions effectively as a memorable warning as well as an assurance of divine justice. Canavesio's investment in the figure of Judas is not

[20] Plesch, *Painter and Priest*, 7.
[21] Plesch, 218.
[22] Plesch, 168.
[23] Plesch, 168.

fleeting; the suicide appears in at least four other passion cycles commissioned throughout Piedmont.[24]

Another unusual aspect of Canavesio's depiction(s) is that it appears to be fairly isolated chronologically. Robson has counted Judas's appearances in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries; she proves that interest in him as an artistic subject rose significantly, from 37, to 65, to 201 appearances in the Quattrocento.[25] While this information is valuable to the current study, it is insufficient for our purposes for two obvious reasons: it gives no indication how these numbers changed over the following centuries, and it does not distinguish how many of the depictions were of his suicide. Benjamin Zweig elucidates the latter: he counts 159 depictions of suicide from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries.[26] He also supplies a chart denoting the date, location, and visual context of each suicidal Judas.[27] However, the sample once again ends long before 1550 and only seventeen of the 159 images are of Italian origin (three of which Zweig also lists as questionable in that regard).[28]

While my primary concern is with more general trends rather than such precise quantification, I *have* been able to ascertain a dramatic break in the upward trajectory suggested by Robson's and Zweig's figures. That is to say, images of Judas committing suicide do not continue to increase over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; neither do they plateau. Indeed, by the Cinquecento, Judas's suicide was exceedingly rare in Italian visual culture. To judge from

[24] The other sites are La Manta, Bastia, Peillon, and Pigna. See Plesch, *Painter and Priest*, 208.
[25] Robson, "Judas and the Franciscans," 31. Robson says that "this pattern can be explained in part by general factors: the accident of survival, the increase in the production of art from the mid-thirteenth century, and the demand created by the new mendicant orders and their rapidly increasing numbers of churches. But there is more to it than that."
[26] Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin," 2.
[27] Zweig, 250-71.
[28] Ibid., 250-71. Top regions depicting Judas's suicide according to Zweig's chart: around 80 in France, 15-18 in Bohemia/Germany, 15-18 in Italy, about 13 in Byzantium, about 10 in both England and Spain, around 10 scattered throughout the rest of Europe, and 1-2 from both Western Asia and North Africa.

the extant works, it seems that other aspects of the Judas narrative were less frequently depicted as well. This abrupt change can be explained in some measure by the shift away from Passion cycles in visual culture; this shift is discussed below.

One of the few exceptions to this trend of Judas's suicide's disappearance from art is a painting by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574)—it makes a drastic contrast to Canavesio's depiction **[Fig. 9]**. Judas appears in a set of panels painted by Vasari in 1542 to decorate the ceiling of a Venetian palazzo. The theme of the ceiling, now dismantled, was the triumph of the virtues; Judas's suicide once again symbolizes Despair, the foil to Hope **[Fig. 10]**. The composition of the Judas panel is odd because of the technical problem that Vasari had to solve: to fit a typically vertical figure into a horizontal panel. Judas appears to be jumping off a balcony, mid-fall—an instant before he lets go of the branch and his neck snaps. A Roman soldier looks on rather unconcernedly. Unlike the previous portrayals, this image shows the act of suicide rather than the aftermath, and thus a living Judas. His body is still intact and there is little in his physical appearance to suggest his wickedness, save the traditionally othering red hair and the yellow garb typical of a fool or a Jew.[29] Despite these attributes, Judas's figure is idealized, rippling with muscles, and perhaps more recognizable because of the traditional red hair. His expression is calm yet sorrowful, conveyed by closed lips and a softly slanting brow. Vasari takes a more compassionate approach than his predecessors, or at least a seemlier one, perhaps reminding the viewer that Judas was only human, and that the act of suicide is necessarily human in nature. It is likely that the location of the image, a person's home, dictated a more palatable representation, but it is equally possible that Vasari's treatment is a reflection of the changing times; the story of Judas takes on new layers of meaning. This painting is not warning the viewer of the repercussions of sin, but of the state of being that leads one to take

[29] Plesch, *Painter and Priest*, 278. It is interesting that Vasari's more compassionate portrayal still retains the othering visual cues of red hair and yellow robes.

such action. In a sacred space, like a church or a baptistry, Judas must be associated with his final crime as a didactic tool to caution against God's wrath. In the home, or at least in *this* home, the figure of Judas is humanized, producing a message conveyed through empathy rather than fear.

The dramatic shift in tone from Canavesio's *Judas* to Vasari's *Judas* may demonstrate a shift in society that distanced Judas from the collective consciousness (a theory I will expand on toward the end of this chapter). A man committing suicide in the Renaissance was a sensitive subject as it put his and his family's reputation at stake. Self-murder was an irrevocable crime against God, society, kin, and the self. The shame of a *hanged* self-murderer only increased the potency of the offense—a womanly, cowardly, base death.[30] Judas, as a result of this one action, is transformed into the antithesis of early modern masculinity.

It is difficult to extrapolate meaning from just one sixteenth-century image, yet the lack of comparable contemporary examples supports the theory that Judas's suicide had accumulated layers of controversy that made it too fraught an artistic subject. This was compounded by a sudden lack of context, as it no longer fit into the visual language of sacred art by the mid-Cinquecento. Vasari's anomalous depiction, however, is an outlier that raises questions we can't really answer.

Cato the Younger: Virtue and Stoic Masculinity

The Classical counterpart to a villain such as Judas was heroic, intelligent, fearless, just; he likely performed great military, political, or even cosmic feats. Cato the Younger (95-46 BC) was one such hero, whose suicide elicited an entirely different response than Judas's—in both classical and early modern societies. He will function as my primary example of the virtuous alternative, representing the opposite end of the spectrum. Marcus Porcius Cato, known simply as

[30] Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin," 25.

Cato, was a Roman of great repute; he was a military leader, orator, stoic, statesman of the late Roman Republic, and nemesis of Julius Caesar. Biographies and anecdotes about Cato were recorded by the likes of Cicero, Lucan, and Plutarch.[31] Cato was famous for his moral integrity, particularly his uncompromising opposition to political corruption. After Caesar's triumph over Cato in the civil war, the defeated Cato decided that he was unwilling to live under his enemy's tyrannical rule. In Plutarch's lengthy account, Cato reportedly stabbed himself in the belly with a recently wounded hand, resulting in a less severe injury than he had intended. When the wound did not succeed in killing him quickly enough, and his friends realized the situation and tried to restrain him, he proceeded to tear out his bowels until he died.[32] The reception of suicides in Roman culture was, broadly speaking, situationally dependent. Aristotle, as I have noted, equivocates on the issue, but agrees that certain motivations for killing oneself are morally acceptable. The response to this particular suicide was fiercely positive—contemporaries lauded his death. Cato has suffered a great loss of honor, but with this act, he reclaims it.

Unlike Judas, Cato's suicide appears not to have found much of an artistic audience prior to the Renaissance. This is easily explained by Christianity's pervasive spread over western civilization, quashing classical pagan culture with it. It makes sense that Judas would remain in the collective consciousness (to some extent) while Cato, a symbol of civic honor, had to wait until the Renaissance to recoup a sliver of his former fame. Domenico Beccafumi's (1486-1551) fresco of Cato's death in the Sienese Palazzo Bindi Sergardi from the first quarter of the Cinquecento

31 Only fragments of Cicero's tract on Cato (65 AD) have survived, amounting to a few sentences. See: C. P. Jones, "Cicero's 'Cato,'" *Rheinisches Museum Für Philologie* 113, no. 2/3 (1970): 188–96; Lucan, *Pharsalia (De Bello Civile)*: Books 2 and 9; Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives* (75 AD), trans. John Dryden (S.l.: Digireads.com, 2018): 68-73.
32 Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. John Dryden, 68-73.

may well be the oldest extant representation from this second period **[Fig. 11]**.[33] The artist had been commissioned to depict scenes of Roman history. The chaotic scene departs notably from Plutarch's description, where the stoical old man dies in the comfort of his bedroom before Caesar can take him prisoner.[34] Beccafumi instead depicts Cato's death amidst a bloody battle, with figures running or laying on the ground, wounded. A soldier on horseback is intent on finishing off the fallen man before him, the only thing standing between himself and Cato. In apparent panic, Cato has already stabbed himself, standing in a sort of dynamic squatting position. Beccafumi may have altered the setting to provide the viewer with enough context to identify the primary figure, which could be difficult to do with a ceiling full of disjointed scenes.

In Guercino's 1641 imagining of Cato's legendary death, the figure is transformed. Between Beccafumi's time and Guercino's (1591-1666), there was an artistic shift from the High Renaissance style to the Baroque. Paintings transitioned from small-scale to large-scale compositions that became more sharply focused on an individual figure. The style introduced a new dramatic tension as the entire content of the frame was concentrated on that single figure—in this case, scale and focus both helped to present Cato as an exemplum of civic virtue. Here the Roman statesman is shown from the waist up, his body occupying much of the composition, as he thrusts the tip of a short rapier into his abdomen **[Fig. 12]**. Just a few drops of blood trickle out of the wound as he twists his head away from the motion, mouth agape, eyes lifted skyward. Guercino uses chiaroscuro, a technique inherited from the sixteenth century and intensified in the baroque period, to illuminate the figure as if with a spotlight, heightening the tension and drawing the

[33] See Joseph Geiger, "Giambettino Cignaroli's Deaths of Cato and of Socrates," *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte* 59, no. 2 (1996), 270. The Venturi family commissioned Beccafumi to paint scenes of Roman history on the ceiling in their home, Palazzo Bindi Sergardi (as it is now known). Vasari briefly mentions this work in Beccafumi's Biography, commenting only on the beauty of the horses.
[34] Plutarch notes that Cato was forty-eight years old, not necessarily what we consider "old" today.

viewer's attention to the violent act. Unlike Beccafumi, who focuses on the immediate aftermath of Cato's self-inflicted injury, Guercino rewinds to the instant where the sword has just pierced flesh. This climactic moment captures the exceptional drive that someone must possess to withstand such intense physical pain and reject the instinctual desire to survive. Thus, Guercino emphasizes Cato's exemplary masculinity in this supreme display of stoicism. Cato's environment, on the other hand, is left mostly to shadow; only the bed and drapery immediately behind him are perceptible—the dark, private chambers serving as an intimate backdrop for our intimate view of his death. Guercino endows his figure with composure, dignity, and evident purpose. He is forefront in the image and therefore forefront in the viewer's mind, demanding compassion, even respect. There is nothing here that suggests the taboo surrounding contemporary suicide in seventeenth-century Italy when this was created. In fact, one sees quite the opposite: the self-murderer is glorified and his method is unflinchingly visible. Cato may not display virtue in typical Catholic fashion (by *enduring* adversity as Christ did, for example), but he does display another mode of courage in the face of defeat and an equally unyielding commitment to his convictions; a sort of pre-Christian martyr, he dies for these secular ideals in acceptable pre-Christian fashion.

In a different version by Milan-based artist Daniele Crespi, created two decades prior in 1622, Cato is shown on his bed, eyes rolled back **[Fig. 13]**. He contorts in agony as he pulls entrails out of the self-inflicted stab wound. Heroic symbols of war are featured prominently in the bottom left corner; Cato's shield and galea, with its blood-red crest, cut across the composition diagonally, paralleling his lacerated torso. The theatricality permeating the scene is not of a critical nature, but a celebratory one: Crespi takes delight in Cato's gruesome resolve. Unlike Guercino's stately depiction, Crespi focuses on savage violence and visceral corporeality. The figure's proven stamina is echoed in his military regalia, significantly absent from Guercino's image, reminding

the viewer that Cato had been a warrior and now dies a warrior's death, even if he is away from the battlefield. The intensely graphic quality of this painting contrasts sharply with the previous one, which instead emphasizes Cato's mental suffering; he was a philosopher too, after all. The two artists are stylistically self-conscious, exploiting the drama in two ways, both of which make sense given how the subject matter was treated in the culture. Despite the divergent representations, both images ultimately communicate the same message—Cato the Younger's suicide was an act of exceptional fortitude; the viewer should stand in respectful awe. Furthermore, the point is not to incite the viewer to commit suicide, but to embody these traits that enabled Cato to do so.

The key distinctions between Judas and Cato lie in method and context: hanging versus stabbing, betrayal and despair versus military defeat and duty. There was an ancient taboo surrounding hanging, which Zweig describes as "a woman's or a slave's method of death, [that] implied a shameful motive."[35] In the Renaissance, hanging was also a form of capital punishment—yet another shameful association. In a similar vein, Strocchia discusses how one's reputation in Renaissance Italy was in a constant state of flux; honor was impermanent, she says, and constantly re-evaluated by society.[36] In the mentality of the Renaissance viewer, Judas and Cato seem to defy this uncertainty with the most permanent action accessible to them. Thus, Judas cements and *magnifies* his dishonor in an unwillingness to redeem himself. Cato, alternatively, reclaims and crystallizes his hard-won honor, simultaneously ensuring that it will never be taken from him again. Suicide is, for Judas, a choice that relieves him of all future responsibility and

[35] Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin," 25.
[36] Sharon Strocchia, "Gender and the Rites of Honour in Italian Renaissance Cities," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy, ed. Judith Brown and Robert Davis* (Routledge, 1998).

emotional burden. He has fallen from grace yet manages to fall further still. For Cato, suicide reverses *and* prevents a fall from grace; it is a display of autonomy rather than helplessness.

Judas and Cato in Christian Doctrine

The Church's official stance on suicide was heavily influenced by Augustine of Hippo, whose disapproval was indisputable.[37] To kill oneself was to commit self-murder, as declared by Augustine in the fifth century AD, a position later expanded upon by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. In *City of God*, Augustine devotes considerable attention to the issue.[38] Though much of the discourse responds to women's suicide following rape (by soldiers during the recent sack of Rome), Augustine also speaks generally and in reference to other scenarios. Judas, he says, exacerbates his initial sin of betrayal by killing himself, for the acts renders him unable to repent or receive God's mercy.[39] Even worse is the suicide of an innocent man who deserved no punishment in the first place: "why, then, should a man who has done no ill do ill to himself?"[40] He considers Cato, too, explaining that the Roman did not really die for his principles because if he had, he would have also killed his son, in order to spare him, too, life under tyranny. The real motivation was to deprive Caesar of the satisfaction of conquering Cato himself.

In another highly influential text, *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas argues for the immorality and unlawfulness of suicide in three succinct points.[41] Firstly, suicide defies natural law due to every being's instinctual desire for self-preservation. Secondly, every individual is a part of a community, and to harm oneself is to harm one's community. Finally, life is a divine gift and no one apart from God has the privilege to take it away. Only a few decades later, Dante Alighieri wrote his *Divina Commedia*, which was

[37] Zweig, "Depicting the Unforgivable Sin," 51.
[38] Augustine, *City of God, Volume I: Books 1-3*, 426 AD, trans. George E. McCracken, Loeb Classical Library 411 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957): Book 1, 17-27.
[39] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. McCracken, 17.
[40] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. McCracken, 17.
[41] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, c. 1274, second part of the second part, question 64, article 5. This was an encyclopedic work used as an introductory theology textbook for university students.

clearly influenced by Aquinas's work. It is interesting, then, how Dante's treatment of suicide becomes so muddled. In the *Inferno,* those who commit suicide are sent to the seventh circle of hell along with the murderers and are punished severely in the so-called "Wood of the Self-Murderers."[42] This is a forest full of the self-killers' souls, where each takes the form of a tree; when their branches are broken, the trees bleed. Dante's opinion on the issue is less straightforward than it would seem, however, since Cato appears in *Purgatorio* rather than the *Inferno*. Instead of "rotting in hell" like all of the other self-murderers, Cato is assigned to guard the mountain of Purgatory.[43] This honorable distinction from the damned is remarkable given that he is one of only two pagans whom Dante effectively pardons. Even Virgil, Dante's guide and idol, resides in the first circle of hell also known as Limbo, where esteemed members of the classical world such as Ovid, Cicero, Socrates, and even Aristotle are doomed to remain. Virtuous people were sent to Limbo because they lived and died before they could be saved by Jesus Christ. Dante's deeming of Cato as somehow less culpable than his fellow pagans is hugely significant because he was not Christian *and he committed self-murder*. However influenced Dante was by men like Thomas Aquinas, he was also clearly influenced by the likes of Virgil and Cicero, familiar sources in the Middle Ages—both of whom praised Cato for his stoical heroism.

I argue that Cato's display of masculine virtue, which I will discuss next, overrides his mortal sin, even in Christian contexts. The laudable so far outweighs the reprehensible that Cato can even cast suicide in a positive light. His actions were excusable, in large part, because he was from a different world than the one known to Renaissance Italians. Ancient Rome was romanticized to the extent that a legendary figure such as Cato, who embodied both political and personal ideals, was held to different standards than contemporaries held each other. There are

[42] Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XIII.
[43] Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio: A New Verse Translation*, trans. W. S. Merwin, 1st edition (New York: Knopf, 2000), Cantos I and II.

also, it seems, echoes of the old Roman mentality that the context is really what matters when evaluating the righteousness of a suicide.

Notions of Masculinity in the Renaissance

At this point it will be useful to take a step back and reflect more critically on gender in early modern Italy. Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier* is a fitting place to start, since it is essentially a guide to ideal masculinity, and to a lesser extent, femininity.[44] The book is densely packed with evidence of Renaissance perspectives on gender (particularly male perspectives), either stated directly or revealed unconsciously, since the author himself was just as much a product of his time as his characters. Castiglione, or his speakers, rather, go on at length about bravery at one point. Peter Burke writes that, to Castiglione, "courage is defined as the mean between rashness and cowardice."[45] The Aristotelian mean that Castiglione proposes is moderation; a man's course of action is defined by composed reason rather than an emotional impulse. Even acts of courage must achieve a certain graceful balance or *sprezzatura*. Guercino's *Cato* does exactly that. The artist depicts violent action with the utmost delicacy—savage yet elegant. Despite his poise, or rather because of it, the figure looks artificially posed. Castiglione advocates for the presentation of effortless grace in all physical activity, echoed in Cato's stance. Performativity was emphasized in all aspects of daily life, and in this figure's case, in all aspects of death.

[44] Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier: The Singleton Translation*, ed. Daniel Javitch, 1st ed, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002).
[45] Peter Burke, *The Fortunes of the Courtier: The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano* (University Park: Penn State Press, 1995). Castiglione is directly referencing a main tenet of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, where ideal virtue is defined as the mean of two extremes.

The concept of *sprezzatura* speaks to elements of the shift that was taking place in sixteenth-century cities throughout central and northern Italy, in particular. With courts came courtly manners, some of which challenged existing ideas of masculinity.[46] Descriptors I used in the preceding paragraph illustrate this: delicacy, elegance, poise, grace. These traditionally feminine qualities were now expected of men too, particularly in high society, although the continuing emphasis on male bravado clashed with the restraint required of the ideal nobleman. Maintaining masculinity became a juggling act: one had to know which situations warranted what kinds of behavior.

Valeria Finucci remarks that "Renaissance culture liked to project a fully empowered and virilized image of masculinity and encouraged frequent gestures toward male self-fashioning."[47] So, why are there relatively few representations of Cato if they function so well as didactic tools, as guides to masculinity? One possibility is that, despite the chasm between Judas and Cato, male suicide was simply too sensitive a subject to achieve widespread appeal, and masculinity too fragile a construct. Men killing themselves was sensitive, perhaps, because it undermined the projected image of the patriarchy. As Sharon Strocchia has argued, masculinity was portrayed "less as a single, unified construct or behavioural system than as a complex code beset by profound tensions."[48] She demonstrates this, in part, by using the example of Renaissance confraternities, which were most often limited to male members. Self-flagellation became an increasingly common group activity for these men in the late fifteenth century, and created strong bonds based on mutual displays of humility and penitence: "a rite of self-abasement from which a member derived his

[46] Elizabeth Currie, *Fashion and Masculinity in Renaissance Florence* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).
[47] Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance*, Bilingual edition (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press Books, 2003), 4.
[48] Strocchia, "Gender and Rites of Honour," 48.

sense of belonging to a harmonious brotherhood of Christ's disciples."[49] Women were excluded from this ritual in particular because the male participants would have considered their feminine presence to be a disturbance of appropriate gender boundaries. A man had to maintain the presentation of superior strength and composure at all times. A man inflicted physical pain on himself as a form of spiritual penance which demanded privacy so as not to be equated with the physical pain he could inflict on his wife and daughters. Self-harm was clearly a nuanced practice that held considerable sway in gender identity; if whipping oneself had the potential to threaten masculine security, then *killing* oneself could be devastating. Self-harm could be defensible, but conditionally—only in the right company, and only to a certain extent.

Conclusion

Because of the delicate subject matter—as well as its relatively small role in a complex narrative—Judas's death appeared almost exclusively in churches as an illustration of God's wrath: it was always part of larger visual program rather than an isolated subject. Indeed, all of the images of Judas referenced in this chapter were excerpted from larger narrative cycles; the diminution of these Passion cycles in late Renaissance Italian visual culture uprooted the iconographic context in which Judas's suicide was desirable for its moralizing potential. It seems reasonable that this phenomenon coincided with another phenomenon that secured his visual decline: namely, intensifying notions that cowardice, weakness, and emotional instability were distinctly feminine characteristics. An emasculated man such as Judas was relegated to the female sex at a time when a man's loss of masculinity meant a loss of his identity and his honor.

[49] Strocchia, "Gender and Rites of Honour," 49.

Cato's death, on the other hand, interested a larger number of late Renaissance artists, who made a good visual case for his heroic qualities. Yet he still was by no means a commonly portrayed hero during an era when heroes of antiquity claimed unprecedented allure in the elite circles that dominated the production of "high" art. Despite classical contemporaries and later writers championing his virtue, Cato's final act of suicide may have given pause to early modern audiences. While Judas exemplified an obvious breach of masculine propriety in the circumstances surrounding his suicide, Cato's relationship to early modern masculinity was more complex. An esteemed man of honor killed himself in a brutal, stoical, principled (and thus manly) fashion, but the ambivalence surrounding suicide was perhaps still enough to temper that masculinity, thus limiting his appeal as an artistic subject. Additionally, Cato's military endeavors and self-sacrifice were symbols of republicanism that no longer harmonized with Italy's increasingly monarchical city-states. There was no place in the court system for suicidal idealists prone to policing corruption and waging civil war. Even though images of Cato's suicide were not direct exhortations to act as he acted, they nevertheless embodied antiquated civic values. Ultimately, though, these are just speculations. It is more difficult, it seems, to ascertain the reason for a subject's unpopularity than for its popularity—so, the latter is precisely what I intend to do in the following chapter by examining the early modern fascination with female suicide.

Chapter Two
Moralizing, Eroticizing, and Undermining Female Suicides

Introduction

As the previous chapter has indicated, there was an overwhelming preference for visualizing suicidal women over men in the late Italian Renaissance. In the present chapter, I elucidate the cultural preoccupation with *female* suicide, considering how culturally constructed notions of gender emerge in depictions of classical subjects. When classical subjects were appropriated for Renaissance audiences, classical, medieval, and modern conceptions of gender and virtue jostled against one another, forming ambiguities and contradictions within the images—namely, the eroticization of chastity and feminine virtue.

Certain female figures from antiquity were admired and emulated by medieval and early modern women, held up as exemplars of morality for over a millennium. Women such as Lucretia, Virginia, Penelope, and Judith modeled ideal notions of social order in their commitment to home, family, and chastity. Indeed, these loyalties (to sexual purity, in particular) were often prized beyond the women's personhood or even their lives. Exemplary women's stories were passed on through the centuries, adapting to fit changing social mores and to model similarly evolving gender roles. The most comprehensive example of this process is perhaps found in Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* (or *On Famous Women*), comprising over one hundred biographies of "history's" most famous women, from Eve to Joanna I of Naples (1328-1382). The treatise was widely read at the time of its completion in 1374 and continued to exert its influence, inspiring a handful of other very similar compilations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as

translations of the original text into multiple languages.[50] Both literary and artistic traditions reveal that *De Mulieribus Claris* provided the "authoritative justification and moral framework for employing these heroines as exemplars of conventionally gendered virtue."[51] It frequently enters into the discussion below to inform visual analysis.

The Cinquecento oversaw a conspicuous parallel trend in the artistic sphere, captured in the growing corpus of fetishized and objectified female exemplars. Their virtuous identities, always malleable, were now stretched farther than ever, becoming totally inverted. The newly sexualized meanings projected onto images of these women reflect a critical aspect of the Zeitgeist, specifically the need for a "palliative to male anxieties concerning disruptive women."[52] To be clear, these heroines were only "disruptive" because of their influential, esteemed status—a status usually reserved for men. Eroticizing female exemplars of virtue tempers their heroism, eliminating feminine agency and therefore, any misconceptions about the proper social order. Feminine virtue must be accompanied, and thus tempered, by feminine weakness.

Female exemplars who committed suicide were uniquely vulnerable to this objectifying treatment because there was already so much ambivalence surrounding the act. Self-murder was doubly susceptible because it could be construed as emblematic of female nature. Legendary suicides were exploited to convey how women were uniquely prone to overreacting, led by their emotions rather than reason; these images demonstrated the intelligence, stability, and courage innately lacking in even the best of women, even from the glorious past.

[50] Margaret Ann Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2006).
[51] Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines*, 19.
[52] Stephen J. Milner, Review of *Boccaccio's Heroines: Power and Virtue in Renaissance Society*, by Margaret Franklin, The Modern Language Review 104, no. 2 (2009): 582–84.

Female Exemplars from Antiquity

The legendary Roman heroine Lucretia was easily the most popular figure in this trope of classical suicides and a favorite moral exemplar throughout the Renaissance. The earliest surviving account of her life appears in Livy's *History of Rome*, written five hundred years after her alleged death in 510 BC. According to Livy, her downfall began with an ill-fated compliment. After Lucretia's husband, Tarquinius Collatinus, boasts of his wife's superior chastity, Sextus Tarquinius, the king's youngest son, comes to see the truth of his claim; he is "seized with a wicked desire to debauch Lucretia by force; not only her beauty, but her proved chastity as well, provoked him."[53] He sneaks into her bed chamber one night, and wakes her with desperate pleas and threats. When she refuses to sleep with him, even if he should kill her, he changes tactics: "not to be moved even by fear of death, he went farther and threatened her with disgrace, saying that when she was dead he would kill his slave and lay him naked by her side, that she might be said to have been put to death in adultery with a man of base condition."[54] It is implicit that no one would find fault with Tarquin's actions but all would be appalled by Lucretia's apparent promiscuity. She evidently recognizes this situation, for "at this dreadful prospect, her resolute modesty was overcome, as if with force, by his victorious lust."[55] After he succeeds in raping her, Lucretia sends for her father, her husband, and the men's two closest friends. Claiming she has lost her honor, the lady explains that though her body has been violated, her heart remains pure. Lucretia asks that the men pledge to avenge her, which they do, but as they attempt to console her, she proclaims "It is for you to determine . . . what is due to him; for my own part, though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; nor in time to come shall ever an unchaste woman live through

[53] Livy. *History of Rome, Volume I: Books 1-2.* Translated by B. O. Foster. Loeb Classical Library 114. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 201.
[54] Livy, History of Rome, 201.
[55] Livy, History of Rome, 203.

the example of Lucretia."[56] She stabs herself in the heart before her companions can intervene. Her husband and father grieve as Lucius Junius Brutus, Collatinus's friend, carries Lucretia's corpse outside to a public square. Over her defiled body, he addresses the gathering crowd, all instantly enraged at the frightful sight. Brutus swears an oath to raise an army and overthrow the tyrannical Tarquins. He succeeds in each of these endeavors and thus, Lucretia's death begets the birth of Roman Republic.[57]

Many centuries later, Lucretia remained in the collective consciousness, gaining popularity as an artistic subject. The appeal of her story was revitalized in Renaissance Italy for two reasons: the recovery of Livy's work further fueled the humanist obsession with the Roman Republic (for which Lucretia was partially to thank, supposedly), and her display of chastity as ideal feminine virtue.[58] For these reasons, her ethical transgression of committing suicide is mitigated, much like Cato's. Lucretia's decision to die is virtuous rather than sinful because she acts in response to her sullied chastity; she commits one sin to redeem an even more important virtue. Once again, the motivation for suicide is critical in the judgment process, as is the individual's social status.[59] In Lucretia's case, suicide is the method by which she, a noblewoman, is cleansed of "disgrace" (an attribute of a rape victim that we struggle to understand today). Purification through self-sacrifice and total commitment to chastity elevate Lucretia to a paragon of virtue and enable her to maintain that status for millennia.

[56] Livy, History of Rome, 203.
[57] Much of Livy's work was recovered in the Renaissance, so readers actually knew of Augustine's *City of God* before Livy's *History of Rome*, reversing the chronology.
[58] Cristelle Louise Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 157; Stephanie H. Jed, *Chaste Thinking: The Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Modern Humanism* (Indiana University Press, 1989).
[59] Minois, *History of Suicide*, 19.

One early and notable challenger, however, was St. Augustine. In *The City of God*, he argues that Lucretia committed murder—murder, no less, of an innocent woman.[60] Within a larger discussion of rape, Augustine (rather progressively) recognizes that women are not intrinsically at fault for their assaults, so Lucretia has committed no crime and has brought no shame upon herself. Essentially, her situation did not warrant such punishment, especially one that, in his eyes, degraded Lucretia and paradoxically caused her to *become* a sinner. Despite Augustine's position, the dominant cultural narrative returned to one of exemplarity; medieval reservations gave way to early modern acceptance. The moral was not that any woman of questionable virtue should follow Lucretia's example and kill herself, but that all women should hold sexual purity in the highest regard and devote themselves to living chastely. Lucretia's biography in Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* endorses this reading, making no mention of her mortal sin: "Hers was an unfortunate beauty. She cleansed her shame harshly, and *for this reason* she should be exalted with worthy praise for her chastity, which can never be sufficiently lauded. *Because of her action*, not only was her reputation restored, which a lewd young man had tried to destroy with the stain of sin, but Rome was made free" [emphasis added].[61] Likewise in the *Inferno*, Dante encounters Lucretia in limbo, the first circle of hell where virtuous pagans are sent—so she, like Cato, avoids the Wood of the Self-Murderers.[62]

Virginia (or Verginia, alternatively) is another classical exemplar of virtue. She did not commit suicide, but she remains worthwhile to this study because her story exhibits the same values as Lucretia's. Boccaccio begins his biography of "The Virgin Verginia" with "Verginia was

60 Augustine, *City of God*, trans. McCracken.
61 Giovanni Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, trans. Guido A. Guarino, 2nd revised ed. (New York: Italica Press, 2011), 103.
62 Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV, p. 33.

a Roman virgin in name and in fact, and she should be reverently remembered."[63] Already, he has referred to her virginity twice and already, it defines her. In short, the young and lovely lady is pursued fervently by a powerful man despite her rebuffs. He devises a plan to take her as his slave, and when it seems likely that he will accomplish this during a public hearing, Virginia's father shouts "Dear daughter, I defend your liberty *the only way I can* [emphasis added]" and stabs her in the breast.[64] Evidently it does not occur to him to kill the man who is threatening her liberty. Regardless, her death spurs another successful Roman rebellion.

From Boccaccio's narratives, we can extrapolate that female virtue exists outside the self, is more precious than the self, and is not the sole property of the self. Rather than existing within and emanating *from* an individual, virtue exists in the collective opinions of the community (and, as it turns out, posterity). Female virtue is, of course, a synonym for chastity, the most sacred of a woman's assets—it is prized and carefully guarded by the men in her life.[65] This is why Virginia's father felt that, as a steward of her virginity, it was his duty and his right to sacrifice his daughter's life for her good name. When Lucretia uses the same logic to commit suicide, Brutus does not hesitate to commandeer her newly restored virtue and wield it to his own ends. Sexual purity is a commodity that only increases in value after death, available to those men who wish to capitalize on her honor and sacrifice.

Dido, Queen of Carthage, has a more complex legacy and a literary tradition "fraught with polemics."[66] Versions of her life differ dramatically, especially when it comes to the part that most concerns us: her death. The prevailing narrative was formed by Virgil's *Aeneid*, and subsequently Ovid's *Heroides*, in which Dido and Aeneas have a passionate love affair before he is called upon

[63] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 128.
[64] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 129.
[65] Strocchia, "Gender and Rites of Honour," 55.
[66] Franklin, Boccaccio's Heroines, 156.

by the Gods to leave Carthage and found Rome. When he sets out with his fleet, the betrayal drives Dido to madness. She climbs atop a funeral pyre that she had ordered built under false pretenses and impales herself upon Aeneas's sword.[67] Dante relies on Virgil's narrative (unsurprisingly), as is evident in his placement of Dido in the second circle of hell, home to sinners guilty of lust.[68] Interestingly, as in Judas's and Lucretia's cases, suicide is not the sin by which she is defined in the afterlife, at least in Dante's influential imagining. In the following century, Dido's reputation got a makeover. Both Petrarch and Boccaccio praise her as a "paragon of marital fidelity and virtue," referencing an alternative narrative in which she stays true to her late husband, Sychaeus.[69] Based on accounts pre-dating Virgil's epic, which Dante and Boccaccio believe to contain historical facts (rather than just older legends), the two proto-humanists disparage the queen's mistreatment. Boccaccio begins his account by expressing his desire to speak at length in Dido's praise to "partly remove the infamy undeservedly cast on the honor of her widowhood."[70] This infamy no doubt refers to what was for Boccaccio Dante's recent and famous portrayal of Dido. Boccaccio then tells of how, following the spread of her fame throughout Africa as a great and virtuous beauty, an African king demands that Dido become his queen and threatens to wage war against Carthage if she does not.[71] Instead, to salvage her purity and her people's safety, she (once again) has a pyre built and stabs herself, exclaiming "My citizens, I go to my husband, as you desire."[72] Boccaccio follows this climactic moment with: "O inviolate honor of chastity! O venerable and eternal example of constant widowhood! O Dido, I wish that widows would turn

[67] Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1-6*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999), Book IV, p. 440-41.
[68] Dante, *Inferno*, Canto V, p. 41.
[69] Jan L. De Jong, "Dido in Italian Renaissance Art. The Afterlife of a Tragic Heroine," *Artibus et Historiae* 30, no. 59 (2009), 81.
[70] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 86.
[71] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 88.
[72] Boccaccio, 88.

their eyes to you, and that especially those who are Christian would contemplate your strength."[73] With this, he launches into a tirade against his unprincipled contemporaries, citing four different arguments that women might use to justify their remarriage. He bitterly rejects each of these perfectly reasonable justifications, countering each with Dido's superior example. The divergent identities of Queen Dido manifest in visual culture, creating distinct iconographies that typify the fallen woman and the exalted woman.

Late medieval and early Renaissance portrayals of Lucretia, Virginia, and Dido are relatively straightforward in their treatment of gendered virtue: they show that chastity compromised, or threatened, requires death to avoid shame. Moreover, the figures exemplify their chastity in their appearance and demeanor. The morality of suicide became more problematic after the fall of Rome, but a lady's intentions to preserve her feminine purity conform thoroughly to medieval and early modern values. The ambivalence surrounding both suicide *and* virtue seeps in, however, as the semblance of chastity in depictions of exemplars subsides over the course of the sixteenth century. A moralizing presence does not disappear completely from the trope, at least in theory, but it becomes increasingly overshadowed by layers of eroticism. In this shift, somehow, willful death, and even chastity, become fetishized—a phenomenon I mean to clarify through the analysis of select early Renaissance works juxtaposed with a selection of later works.

Moralizing Representations

To appreciate the shift from virtuous to erotic subject, let us begin by looking at an example of the former: Sandro Botticelli's painted *cassone* panel from the turn of the Cinquecento featuring *The Story of Lucretia* **[Fig. 14]**. Cassoni are large marriage chests that were used to carry a bride's

[73] Boccaccio, 88.

trousseau in a public procession before being stationed in the nuptial chamber.[74] They became luxury items in and of themselves and were often decorated with magnificent paintings; a demand for these commodities "glorified not only the possessor's affluence but his active participation in the prevailing aesthetic and intellectual climate [and] inspired the decoration of domestic furnishings with illustrations of classical subjects."[75] Lucretia was one such subject, and not an uncommon one.

Botticelli's version depicts three separate scenes from the narrative simultaneously; architectural elements create distinct segments of the composition to guide the eye from one event to the next. On the left, a doorway frames Tarquin confronting Lucretia with a knife, signaling her imminent rape. Captured in an archway of the loggia to the right, four horrified men rush to support Lucretia as she slumps over lifelessly. In the center, Romans swarm Lucretia's corpse with the knife still protruding prominently from her chest, their own weapons raised, as Brutus addresses the crowd from a pedestal supporting a triumphal sculpture of Judith. The unfortunate Lucretia is fully dressed in each iteration, and only alive in one. Her body is on display for the viewer, objectified and motionless like the chaste, stone Judith above; though Botticelli appears to overlook Lucretia's capacity for thinking, feeling, and acting, the emphasis nevertheless remains on her sacrifice rather than her sexuality. Indeed, her rape on the left and her death on the right are thrust aside to frame the central event: Brutus's call to arms aided by the spectacle of her martyred body.[76] The heroine takes a backseat to Brutus—a figure whose dynamism commands real attention, accentuated further by the central arch within the central structure.[77]

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[74] Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, 4. Baskins notes that the term *cassone* is something of an anachronism, as the objects were typically referred to as *forzieri* in the Renaissance.
[75] Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines*, 17.
[76] Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, 145.
[77] This image, and other early examples like it, paint a complex portrait of gender roles that warrants more reflection than I am able to provide here. For an in-depth discussion, see Joshel's chapter in: *Sexuality*

That this panel was commissioned for a *marriage* chest is telling in itself. The subject is meant to function didactically in its embodiment of wifely virtue and, I would argue, husbandly virtue in the form of Brutus. Cristelle Baskins addresses how "fathers and husbands [could] tolerate the example of Lucretia (a raped woman who commits suicide) and Collatinus (a widower cuckolded by his own kinsman) on painted wedding furniture to be presented to newlywed couples," with the following insight:

> The rape, suicide, and public display of Lucretia's dead body on luxuriously painted *cassoni* or *spalliere* present an extremely ambiguous model of female heroism . . . Women may learn to prize chastity above life itself, and men may be reassured about women's fortitude in the face of adversity. But Lucretia's example also reveals that . . . gestures of castigation, like suicide and regicide, *replay the dynamics of desire and consumption they are meant to abolish* [emphasis added].[78]

Virginia, too, was a subject found on *cassoni*, including another by Botticelli **[Fig. 15]**; she and Lucretia "form a thematic pair in the late Medieval and Renaissance iconography of 'Good Women.'[79] Other fifteenth-century domestic pictures, drawing on the ancient Roman textual sources that recorded the twin political sacrifices of Virginia and Lucretia, also pair the exemplary chaste heroines."[80] Boccaccio's *Famous Women* acted as an iconographical guidebook "on the depiction of figures known only through literary precedents," such as these two women; his influence is evident in many representations.[81] Even more importantly, Boccaccio justified their status as exemplars in the first place.

Dido enters the ranks of virtuous exemplars in *cassoni* as well, although she does so more assertively in a print by Andrea Mantegna **[Fig. 16]**. This print is a more apt comparison because

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and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources, ed. Laura McClure, Interpreting Ancient History (Oxford, UK ; Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

[78] Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, 156.

[79] Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, 157.

[80] Baskins, 161.

[81] Franklin, Boccaccio's Heroines, 18.

it was completed around the turn of the sixteenth century, the same time as Botticelli's *cassoni*, but ventures out of the strictly domestic artistic sphere. Margaret Franklin clarifies that Mantegna was undoubtedly following Petrarch's and Boccaccio's version of the legend, which humanists considered to be historically accurate rather than purely literary.[82] Remember that in their understanding of events, Dido was not Aeneas's spurned lover but a chaste widow. Petrarch even claimed that Aeneas and Dido could not have met because they were born roughly three hundred years apart.[83] Franklin's visual evidence for this narrative is, to begin with, the urn Dido cradles against her belly containing, she says, the ashes of her late husband; the vessel "may also represent her own inviolate chastity which, despite her worldly achievements, she still values above wealth, power, and, ultimately, life itself."[84] Furthermore, this print is a pendant to a companion portrait of the Old Testament heroine Judith—another wealthy, beautiful widow dedicated to her husband's memory and her own enduring chastity.[85] She, like Dido and Lucretia, is willing to take violent action to do what she feels is her duty, though she murders someone else rather than herself. Specifically, Judith seduces and beheads a general named Holofernes who poses a grave threat to her village of Israelites. If the concept of active seduction seems at odds with chastity, rest assured that the scripture is exceedingly clear about Judith's lack of physical contact with Holofernes and her unwavering devotion to her deceased husband. Indeed, these repeated assurances of humility, purity, and the *temporary* nature of her strength and courage authorize a gorgeous, wealthy, man-killing woman to function as a biblical and artistic exemplar without upsetting patriarchal society. Judith, like Virginia, is often paired with Lucretia as a paragon of virtue. Given Lucretia's pairing

[82] Margaret Franklin, "Mantegna's 'Dido': Faithful Widow or Abandoned Lover?," *Artibus et Historiae* 21, no. 41 (2000): 111–22.
[83] Franklin, "Mantegna's Dido," 114.
[84] Franklin, "Mantegna's Dido," 116.
[85] The book of Judith is considered apocryphal but was popular artistic source material.

with Judith in addition to Judith's pairing with Dido, it follows that Lucretia and Dido were also complementary exemplars.

Returning to domestic art, *spalliere* were not the only form that featured images of female virtue. Maiolica is a type of earthenware with an opaque white tin glaze, associated in particular with the Italian Renaissance, when it reached its pinnacle of colorful embellishment.[86] Most of the pieces featuring images of suicidal women that I have found were produced in the first half of the Cinquecento. A shallow bowl created circa 1540, for example, bears a bust-style portrait of Lucretia **[Fig. 17]**. The figure appears serene despite the tip of a large knife somehow anchored in her chest, the hilt of which divides the "u" from the "c" in her name along the top right edge. Lucretia's hair is covered and there is just the slight suggestion of cleavage above her neckline. I speculate that her calm, demure appearance together with the small amount of blood that spills from her wound may have been conducive to integrating such a horrific subject into one's dining experience.

An earlier piece by Giorgio Andreoli from 1522 depicts a full-figured Dido, outdoors with arms outspread, a knife poised in her hand, and a flaming funeral pyre beside her **[Fig. 18]**. This image was after Marcantonio Raimondi's print of Dido circa 1510, which in turn, is after Raphael's drawing of Lucretia produced a year or two before **[Figs. 19, 20]**.[87] The jump from Raphael's depiction to Andreoli's illustrates a startling drop in quality, but each of the iterations places emphasis on the grace of the female form in standard contrapposto. The details of Dido's suicide are not recreated word for word in Raimondi's print, but minor changes in his figure evoke a loss of control in a way that Raphael's *Lucretia* does not. Raimondi's *Dido* mirrors *Lucretia* almost exactly if flipped on its vertical axis, but Raimondi has chosen to alter his figure's grip on her

[86] Julia E. Poole, *Italian Maiolica* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[87] De Jong, "Dido in Italian Renaissance Art," 79.

weapon, making her control of it seem less stable and determined. While Lucretia's mouth is closed, Dido's is opened, once again eroding her composure. Similarly, Dido's eyes roll disconcertingly upward where Lucretia's look evenly ahead. Lastly, Lucretia turns from the knife to an arm held up as if to signify her welcoming death. Dido too turns from the weapon, her arm flailing outward as if seeking help. The print echoes Franklin's summary of Dido's persona in Ovid's *Heroides*: "[Ovid] emphasizes the weak and dependent aspects of Dido's character . . . [and] maintains Virgil's image of a woman burning with a passion that is beyond her control."[88]

The two *Didos* emerging from Raphael's *Lucretia* offer an alternative to Mantegna's non-Virgilian exemplar of chastity, managing to evoke a very different response. Indeed, Raimondi's print and Andreoli's vessel recall Virgil's description of the suicide, albeit a bit stiffly: "But Dido, trembling and frenzied with desperate purpose, rolling her bloodshot eyes, her quivering cheeks flecked with burning spots, and pale at the coming of death, bursts into the inner courts of the house, mounts in madness the high pyre and unsheathes the [Trojan] sword, a gift besought for no such end!"[89] Raphael's *Lucretia* does not resemble Mantegna's *Dido* as closely as it does Raimondi's, and yet the first two figures have far more in common in terms of exemplarity. These various dichotomies show how in the Quattrocento and early Cinquecento, vice (Virgilian Dido) and virtue (non-Virgilian Dido/Lucretia) were represented in perceptibly different fashions.

All of the images discussed up to this point depict beautiful women. Some of them, such as the three Lucretia/Didos, are even partially nude, with one breast exposed. Yet, it would be incorrect to classify any of these images as erotic. Emphasizing an exemplar's beauty may be objectifying (in our contemporary thinking, at least), but it is not inherently eroticizing. Indeed, beauty was, for women in particular, a physical signifier of virtue. So, for example, Raphael's

[88] Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines*, 157.
[89] Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IV, p. 439-41.

Lucretia has an idealized appearance because it echoes her ideal virtue. In Boccaccio's *De Mulierbius Claris*, the vast majority of biographies describe the woman as attractive, often in a hyperbolic manner, for instance: "her great beauty such as had never been seen before."[90] These descriptions tend to go hand-in-hand with descriptions of feminine virtue. For Lucretia, Boccaccio claims that "It is not clear whether she seemed more lovely than the other Roman women because of her beauty or because of her virtue."[91] It follows that artistic representations would highlight the beauty of its subjects, conflating a visual attribute with the purely conceptual attribute of virtue; consider images of the Virgin Mary, for instance. In addition, the nude human form was integral to classical art and as such, became integral to Renaissance art. This observation creates a rather hazy foundation for what constitutes "erotic" art, when neither beauty nor nudity suffice as evidence in and of themselves. I would argue, however, that many early Renaissance images of Cleopatra devise a clear contrast to the non-overtly erotic images of Lucretia, Virginia, and Dido. In order to keep some variables the same, let us consider another two pieces of maiolica from the early to mid-Cinquecento. In the first, by Francesco Xanto Avelli, Cleopatra is entirely nude, without even a cloth to cover her pubic area **[Fig. 21]**. The drapery behind her, on the other hand, serves to highlight the silhouette of her idealized figure. Cleopatra looks off into the distance just as Lucretia and Dido do, though her hair is uncovered and windswept and, most tellingly, the murder weapon is sexualized. The two intertwining snakes she clings to her breast resemble animate phalluses, wriggling suggestively near her nipples. The second piece is even more explicitly erotic **[Fig. 22]**.[92] The Queen of Egypt is once again nude, accentuated by a golden cape clasped around her neck. The folds of the cloth parallel her hips and emphasize the creamy

[90] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 88. This is a description of Dido.
[91] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 101.
[92] The vessel bears the name "Melissa" underneath Cleopatra's image, which, according to Dr. Louis A. Waldman, was likely the name of the object's recipient.

whiteness of her skin. This time, however, Cleopatra looks down, directly at the snake she holds who once again hovers near her nipple, ready to strike. Her coy gaze reveals intentionality and agency in her death as well as her active participation in the sexual dynamics of the image.

Eroticizing depictions of Cleopatra come from a historiographic tradition exemplified by Boccaccio. His biography of Cleopatra opens with the assertion that the queen "became an object of gossip for the whole world," who assumed the throne through crime; she garnered praise only for her beauty, yet "became known throughout the world for her greed, cruelty and lustfulness."[93] He continues to describe her and her pursuits as lewd, covetous, wanton, and wicked, among a host of other insults. These refer to her aggressive rule and notorious affairs with both Julius Caesar and Marc Antony. It becomes clear that, for Boccaccio, her true crimes were ambition and illicit sexual relations and that these colored all aspects of her life. This biography together with the two maiolica vessels demonstrate how, even before the eroticizing trend of the mid-Cinquecento, Cleopatra "stood in the popular imagination as a temptress and sexual libertine, symbol of the dangers of women's power and of Oriental treachery."[94] During the moralizing period, Cleopatra acts as a foil to Lucretia, Dido, and Virginia, just as Judas is a foil to Cato.

Eroticized Representations

While ambiguous and problematic, the legends of exemplary tragic heroines from antiquity were still considered moralizing fodder for domestic and courtly audiences at the start of the sixteenth century.[95] According to Garrard, "by the seventeenth century in Italy, this heroic and

[93] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 192.
[94] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 210.
[95] Cassoni fell out of fashion in the early sixteenth century, around the same time that female suicide was being sexualized and distanced from the domestic sphere. Refer to: Cristelle Baskins, *Cassone Painting, Humanism, and Gender in Early Modern Italy*.

moral dimension had been totally eliminated from most painted images of the famous suicides, replaced by a shallow and superficial eroticism that was elevated to art only by the artist's individual talent."[96] The same legends that had been used to dictate appropriate behavior were adapted, shifting to cater overtly to the male gaze; the classical female exemplar rose in popularity as an artistic subject, but her chastity became obscured by "dynamics of desire and consumption." That is not to say that virtue disappears altogether, as Garrard rather simplistically suggests; I see the process more as an overshadowing of virtue rather than an eradication. But before delving into this issue any further, let us consider the images on their own terms.

The seemingly paradoxical union of chastity and eroticism is illustrated by the transition from such works as Botticelli's *Tragedy of Lucretia* to Luca Cambiaso's *Lucretia*, painted half a century later **[Fig. 23]**. Cambiaso's *Lucretia* in the Blanton Museum of Art, painted circa 1565, is fairly standard in regard to eroticized female death—a practice becoming very common in, but by no means singular to, this era.[97] The figure is nude save a wisp of diaphanous fabric draped across her hips as she stands alone in her bedroom, bedsheets in disarray behind her—a blatant reminder of the violent transgression that has just taken place there. Leaning against the bed in exaggerated contrapposto, her body is posed and visually available to the viewer as she pierces the flesh just below her breast. The new style of visualizing female suicide typified by Cambiaso's *Lucretia* was obviously tailored to entice a male audience, to attract its gaze. Several things needed to happen to ensure this appeal, summarized by Griselda Pollock's insight that "the sexual politics of looking function around a regime which divides into binary positions, activity/passivity, looking/being

[96] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 215.
[97] See Giulo Bora, *Capolavori Della Suida-Manning Collection*, eds. Jonathan Bober and Giulo Bora (Milano: Skira, 2001): 76-77.

seen, voyeur/exhibitionist, subject/object."[98] To begin with, the subject must become "subject to sexual commodification," thus becoming object.[99] The Lucretia paradigm is nude, conventionally beautiful, and entirely vulnerable as she is proffered to the viewer for visual consumption. In the legend, Lucretia's body is used against her will for the sexual gratification of a man more powerful than she. In the image, for the second time, she is stripped of her clothes, her autonomy, and now too her voice—unable to give *or* deny permission, she is made defenseless to prevent further sexual gratification at the mere sight of her forcibly sexualized body.

Similarly, the figure does not display psychological depth; she is a blank slate, a sponge ready to absorb whatever fantasy or desire the viewer would project onto her. Lucretia's glance is crucial in this regard as she looks neither at the viewer, which would communicate interiority, nor at anything within the composition, which could ground her in her own reality or at least suggest awareness of her actions. Instead, she looks beyond the top left corner of the frame, with an air that she is not actually seeing. The lack of confrontation with the viewer or interaction with her surroundings gives unfettered, voyeuristic access to every inch of the composition including, of course, her body. Additionally, the setting is vague yet intimate, unlike the highly detailed and highly public space in which Botticelli's Lucretias reside. Cambiaso's interior environment is darkened by shadow, allowing the viewer to feel both comfort that Lucretia is safely within the domestic sphere where she belongs, as well as the titillating freedom to dream up whatever expanded setting suits his fancy. The figure is trapped in darkness, a space where all expansions are constructed within the viewer's imagination. She is wherever he wants her to be. Formerly, as in Botticelli's earlier image, the viewer was put into the position of grieving father, vengeful

[98] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London; New York: Routledge, 1988): 87.
[99] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 89.

kinsman, or even self-sacrificial, virtuous victim. Come mid-Cinquecento, Lucretia's suicide is fetishized and the viewer seduced as he unwittingly assumes the role of her violator.

The erotic viewing experience is, however, inevitably tempered by a pre-existing narrative. Lucretia's historical identity as a paragon of virtue exists outside the image, in cultural tradition and thus the mind of the viewer, whether or not he is conscious of the ambivalence this creates. The figure is bereft of agency but not necessarily of her virtue. Just as Tarquin was able to conquer and objectify the virtuous Lucretia of ancient Rome, so too is the viewer able to visually conquer and objectify the virtuous Lucretia of Renaissance Italy.

Luca Cambiaso's *Lucretia* acts as a case study for countless other eroticized Lucretias and now Cleopatras. Indeed, its remarkable similarities to Guido Reni's *Cleopatra*, created sixty years later, demonstrates the enduring appeal of this visual approach **[Fig. 24]**.[100] The queen supports herself on a stack of cushions with a hopeless, searching, skyward gaze. In a familiar configuration, the small snake held to Cleopatra's breast hovers suggestively by her nipple, about to strike. Unlike the earlier contrast that I drew, which pitted images of Lucretia and Dido against those of Cleopatra. Now Lucretia and Cleopatra are iconographically interchangeable (with the exception of the self-murder weapon). Cleopatra, seen in the Renaissance as a temptress who seduced powerful Romans to gain control over them, is now depicted no differently from a paragon of chastity. Garrard remarks on this improbable pair, whose only commonality is suicide: despite the chasm between Lucretia and Cleopatra, "the visual potential of their self-slaughter appealed to the imaginations of artists . . . and we find numerous similar depictions of [their suicides] . . . among the staple themes of Renaissance and Baroque art."[101] This point is brought home by Reni's own

[100] See Richard E. Spear, *The "Divine" Guido: Religion, Sex, Money, and Art in the World of Guido Reni* (Yale University Press, 1997), 77-100.
[101] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 210.

version of *Lucretia* (circa 1635-40), nearly identical in countenance and position to yet another of his *Cleopatras* (circa 1638-39).[102] This artist, his patrons, or a combination of both, were particularly drawn to tragic suicides, painting and commissioning numerous images of each of these figures.

Guido Cagnacci (1601-1663) is another artist who displays an evident fascination with famous female suicides, influenced stylistically by the Bolognese school. His painting of Lucretia from the mid-Seicento, almost entirely indistinguishable from a second created around this time, resembles a cropped version of Cambiaso's **[Fig. 25]**. Cagnacci zooms in to focus solely on the nude figure from the waist-up, he places her against a pitch-black background, making use of the same sort of tenebrism employed by his predecessor, Luca Cambiaso, a century before (c. 1660). Lucretia, sitting down, holds a dark, thin knife between her breasts. Though her face is turned away, up toward the source of light on the right, her eyes are downcast, looking right back at the knife. Her full lips are parted, rounding off an ambiguous expression that could communicate either coquettish invitation or the anticipatory inhale before acute pain. She is both angelic and arch.

The violent eroticism in scenes of Lucretia's rape also escalated in the sixteenth century. Titian's example from late in his career will serve as an example of this related subject in the Venetian school of painting **[Fig. 26]**.[103] In this image, Tarquin forces himself upon Lucretia, restraining her flailing arm with one hand and pointing a glinting blade at her with the other. He props one knee up on the bed, between Lucretia's thighs. She attempts to resist but is easily overpowered by the man looming over her. The painterly style of Titian's work lends itself to a

[102] Spear, *The "Divine" Guido*, 77-100.
[103] See Michael Jaffé and Karin Groen, "Titian's 'Tarquin and Lucretia' in the Fitzwilliam," *The Burlington Magazine* 129, no. 1008 (1987): 162–72.

sense of motion, imparting a sense of immediacy that, surprisingly, is not always apparent in rape scenes. The figures are dynamic and their faces also display emotions appropriate to the circumstances: his menacing and determined, hers befittingly shocked, tear-stained, and terrified. Though it is a more emotionally empathetic portrait of Lucretia than we often find in this period, the fact remains that she is naked though luxuriously bejeweled, a lovely woman on the brink of ravishment. She is more adorned than any of the other figures up to this point, sporting pearls around her neck and golden bracelets, earrings, and ring, all encrusted with precious gems. These accessories provide a stark contrast with her naked body, emphasizing her implied disrobing. Lucretia's horrified expression mixed with her lush body convey a woman who is both chaste and erotic.

Eroticization in Cultural and Artistic Contexts

The looming question is how to interpret the fact that images of female suicide took an erotic turn at this particular point in history—why the sixteenth century?[104] One component was undoubtedly stylistic. Oil paint was on the rise while tempera was on its way out, leading to dramatic developments in painting techniques. Because of the way the medium glides across a surface, oil paint lends itself to a certain sensuality and dynamism that was not organic to the previous processes. Additionally, it gives the artist far more freedom to experiment with washes and glazes that can produce gradual, naturalistic shading; these techniques resulted in more lifelike imitations of the human body than ever before.

[104] It is, perhaps, unfair not to acknowledge that some diversity naturally existed in representations of female suicide after the mid-Cinquecento. Examples certainly exist between 1550 and 1650 that display more compassion and dignity than the eroticized ones I discuss here. However, my concern is with the conspicuous trend rather than the exceptions, and even these exceptions are more sexualized than the previous generation of images due simply to the nature of mannerist and baroque painting.

Images also became less blatantly didactic, inspired more and more by aesthetics. Passion cycles, like those by Canavesio at the end of the Quattrocento, and domestic *spalliere* such as those by Botticelli soon after, were replaced by large-scale paintings, often of single figures—the emphasis gravitating toward human form and away from linear, narrative scenes. Similarly, secular subjects were commissioned by a growing number of patrons, following the growth of patronage outside the church. There was an explosion in the practice of collecting domestic paintings of this new sort, motivated in large part by the social status associated with patrons of the arts. History scenes became the most prestigious genre of painting, fed of course by humanism's renewed fascination with antiquity and mythology. Moreover, patrons were primarily men, and early modern men had various agendas concerning women. Garrard explains that:

> Painters of the Renaissance and Baroque periods in particular were obliged—or perhaps more accurately, quite willing—to pander to the tastes of their patrons, and, playing on fixed notions about women's inevitable bent toward self-sacrifice, to show them dying by their own hand, typically as sensual nudes, thus offering a simultaneous gratification of misogynous and erotic impulses.[105]

The resulting presentation of the sexy yet sexually unavailable Lucretia paradigm offers a complex portrait of the ideal woman, or for male viewers, perhaps a fantasy of the ideal wife. What man would not want to marry a wife who was so beautiful, that she would unintentionally incite passion in other men, providing that she was also loyal enough to rebuke any potential lovers? Furthermore, the early modern wife would ideally hold her chastity above all else, even be willing to die for it (at least symbolically), thus preserving her family's reputation as well as the integrity of her husband's lineage.[106] In this way, I argue that for the early modern viewer, suicidal

[105] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 214.
[106] Michael Rocke, "Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Robert C. Davis and Judith C. Brown (Routledge, 1998), 150.

exemplars retain at least a lingering capacity for virtue in addition to their more prominent erotic appeal.

Karen-Edis Barzman cautions that the "assumption of the universal value of our own models of interpretations illustrate the pitfalls of neglecting to historicize reception or to acknowledge that cultural differences condition the way subjects construe meaning in historically specific and often radically divergent ways." I would expand this thought to say that a strictly modern feminist approach to this corpus of images, such as Garrard's at times, is misguided and limiting—or, at least, a different sort of project.[107] It is perhaps too easy to moralize the past in the terms of our own, entirely discrete, moral climate. Even if the iconography of classical suicide changes, emphasizing sexuality and the body rather than more subtle traits of character, an exemplar's connotations of chastity do not simply evaporate; chastity is a bodily state as well as a moral ideal. Vasari himself demonstrated in his *Lives* that works of art were discussed in terms of the viewer's experience.[108] Artists of the Late Renaissance and Baroque periods took advantage of art's inherently voyeuristic properties, pushing them to new extremes. Eroticism was a triumph of the new period of painting and male artists could demonstrate artistic prowess in eliciting a strong response from the viewer.[109]

The eroticizing process does not simplify these images—indeed, it makes them more complex. If, as I contend, all traces of virtue are not effaced from the trope of eroticized suicides, then those traces must *coexist* with eroticism. Eroticism cannot altogether replace preexisting

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[107] Karen-Edis Barzman, "Gender, Religious Representation and Cultural Production in Early Modern Italy," in *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Robert C. Davis and Judith C. Brown (Routledge, 1998), 219.

[108] Svetlana Leontief Alpers, "Ekphrasis and Aesthetic Attitudes in Vasari's Lives," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 23, no. 3/4 (1960): 190–215.

[109] Stephanie S. Dickey, "Damsels in Distress: Gender and Emotion in Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Art," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 60 (2010), 53.

narratives, even if it overshadows them. This coexistence of virtue and so-called vice within the trope is awkward and uneasy; the depiction of a beautiful suicide is as disconcerting as it is alluring, thereby tension drives the images and makes for a compelling viewing experience.

Fetishizing Fragility and Reinforcing Female Nature

Still another layer of meaning resides in scenes of suicidal women, for they are not simply erotic: they also demonstrate the instability of the female psyche—the lack of fortitude, the tendency toward rash, emotional behavior.[110] Judith C. Brown remarks that "chastity was the central component of women's honour and its loss had serious social consequences. The difficulty was that women were less prone to reason and hence more vulnerable to sexual temptations. A lot rested on a very weak base."[111] Driven to hysteria by her loss of virtue, the beautiful but foolish Lucretia panics and kills herself. In this visually revised narrative, she does not display moral strength as Cato does, but rather irrational impulsiveness.

Emphasizing a woman's unstable thought and behavior preceded and sustained the eroticism in her suicide. This was but one aspect of a pervasive societal effort to define and thus control women. As we have seen, images of tragic heroines go hand in hand with treatises on exemplary females—also in an obvious effort to define and enforce distinct spheres of gender. In Boccaccio's biography of Lucretia, still centuries before she becomes a sexual icon, he had already begun to mold her suicide into a gendered act. He describes how she told her family "tearfully" what had befallen her, and "as [they] consoled her while she cried wretchedly, she took out a knife . . ." to plunge into her chest.[112] In this narrative, an unflattering lapse of self-control is inextricably

[110] Dickey, "Damsels in Distress," 66.
[111] Judith C. Brown, "Introduction," to *Gender and Society in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Robert C. Davis and Judith C. Brown (Routledge, 1998), 11.
[112] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 102.

bound to her sacrifice. Ironically, portrayals of the Lucretia paradigm came to echo Virgil's description of Dido, which Boccaccio and Petrarch had tried so hard to discredit: "Overcome by anguish, harboring on madness . . . [Dido] had not died through fate, or by a well-earned death, but wretchedly, before her time, inflamed with sudden madness . . ."[113] Virgil and Dante's stories of Dido (a figure more popular in literary traditions than artistic ones, for some reason) had provided the footing for suicide's long-standing association with and conflation of feminine vices: lust coupled with weakness. Cleopatra reinforced this notion because of her separate association with sexuality and thus helped to cement the sex/suicide trope.[114] Dido's lust was more sympathetic as it was motivated by love rather than political ambition, aided by weakness rather than immoderate sexuality. Lucretia as an artistic subject (or object) thus adopts both the Virgilian Dido's fragility and Cleopatra's eroticism—traits never ascribed to her in antiquity.

The development towards a feminized imagery of female suicide provides the context for a second consideration—the way female suicide was distinct from male suicide. For ultimately, these images of women's suicides are less about morality and sexuality than they are agency. From inception, the legacies of famous female suicides have been governed by men. In life (whether real or legendary), these women had moderate control over their images; in death, the men who came after dictated whether the deceased exhibited virtue and what she ought to represent to posterity. Boccaccio's exceptional women, for instance, "serve to control and stabilize received boundaries between the genders, so that, far from challenging the norms about women, the concept of exceptionality actually reinforces societal norms."[115]

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113 Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IV.
114 Baskins, *Cassone Painting*, 41.
115 Diana Robin, "Woman, Space, and Renaissance Discourse," in *Sex and Gender in Medieval and Renaissance Texts: The Latin Tradition*, ed. Barbara K. Gold et al., SUNY Series in Medieval Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 168.

So then, how do these constructed notions of female nature differ from constructed notions of masculinity? Consider Cato and Lucretia. Just as Cato suffers a military defeat, Lucretia suffers a defeat of honor and, like him, she seeks death as a means of reclaiming her agency. Whether she achieves that reclamation is another matter, for *unlike* Cato, whose suicide is both a conscious decision as well as a statement of political and ethical ideals, a woman's suicide is simply an expedient way out of a difficult situation. Images of Cato convey stoical purpose, while Lucretia, portrayed as honorable too, initially, comes to convey confusion and impulsiveness. In this way the viewer can liken her to Judas because, in his own display of infirmity, he too exhibits qualities (confusion, impulsiveness) outside the realm of acceptable masculinity. Cambiaso displays this symbolic emasculation in his depiction: Lucretia is limp, and her gaze unfocused, calling into question how she had the vitality, let alone mental willpower, to stab herself seconds before. The same feebleness and delicacy is reflected in Reni's *Cleopatra*. Despite all we know about her—about her renowned intelligence, her fierce rulership, her strategic alliances—she appears helpless, pitiful, weak. Cambiaso's and Reni's figures lean back against beds to steady themselves, unlike Guercino's *Cato*, who stands tall. He is rigid, his muscles taut, while his female counterparts are soft and languid. Whether or not the Lucretia paradigm possesses self-control in the original narrative—it all becomes distorted and ultimately irrelevant to her visual representation.

Chapter Three
The *Virtuosa* and Her Subject: Autonomy Revitalized, Femininity Redefined

Introduction

Thus far we have looked at how images of suicide were gendered, eroticized, and subverted in ways that reflected the historical moment. In this chapter, I examine the works of several female artists. I demonstrate how they used purely visual information to encode a sense of heroic virtue in classical female suicides, notably absent from previous examples by their male contemporaries.[116] These works, primarily by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1653) and Elisabetta Sirani (1638-1655), are not overlaid with meretricious eroticism, yet neither are they incompatible with fundamental notions of femininity as they were understood by society. By adding specific works by Gentileschi and Sirani to this study, I illustrate a progression from "masculine" suicide to "feminine" suicide to ostensibly "masculinized" female suicide. This last, "gender fluid" stage is a product of representations of heroic masculinity as well as unheroic femininity, resulting in subjects that are both heroic *and* female.[117] How that heroic female is constructed within the paintings is the subject of this chapter. Because Sirani and Gentileschi return individuality to their subjects, the content of this chapter is organized differently from the last. Here I give a distinct section to each of the three primary artistic subjects: Lucretia, Portia, and Cleopatra.

The developments we have witnessed in Gentileschi's and Sirani's representations of gender and agency were accompanied by societal reevaluations of suicide as an ethical dilemma, stirrings of which occurred in the sixteenth century. Initially the debate on the ethics of suicide took place within a religious context. But by the end of the seventeenth century, "the 'modern'

[116] Building on scholarship by Babette Bohn and Mary D. Garrard, in particular.
[117] I do not mean this to sound anachronistic. I use the term "gender fluid" figuratively and without any allusion to current discourse on gender identity.

view of suicide had been formulated: that suicide was not an offense against God but merely a matter of personal choice unencumbered by theological or dogmatic considerations and devoid of blame or disgrace."[118] The images I discuss in this chapter from the early and mid-seventeenth century predate this shift slightly, but I argue that a forward-thinking momentum is sometimes detectable.

I acknowledge that not all of the works by Gentileschi and Sirani break tradition by empowering the portrayed figures, just as not every male-authored image of female suicide from the Late Renaissance represented the woman subject as eroticized and incapacitated. Gentileschi and Sirani were products of seventeenth-century Italy who both adhered to and broke away from contemporary trends. To remove them from this seventeenth-century context would be to deny them their place in the canon among their male contemporaries.[119] All artistic oeuvres were also highly subject to the whims of the market, so it is impossible to say how much patrons influenced female artists' more and less conventional images. This is not to say that the works discussed below are mere flukes in the oeuvres of a few female artists and are thus peripheral to the general discussion. Rather, their exceptionality gets at the very core of this conversation. Bohn remarks, for example, that despite elements of eroticism in some of her work, Sirani was "more consistent in creating innovatively virtuous interpretations of heroines from *classical* history than in other subjects," such as Mary Magdalene.[120]

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[118] Gary B. Ferngren, "The Ethics of Suicide in the Renaissance and Reformation," in *Suicide and Euthanasia*, Philosophy and Medicine (Springer, Dordrecht, 1989), 155–81: 155. This is not to say that suicide was unproblematically accepted, as Ferngren seems to suggest. Rather, the conversation shifted in a more progressive direction.

[119] For further discussion on the systemic exclusion of female artists from the art historical canon, refer to Linda Nochlin's foundational text on the subject: Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *Women, Art, and Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

[120] Babette Bohn, "The Antique Heroines of Elisabetta Sirani," *Renaissance Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002), 56. Emphasis added.

Women and Artistic Production

All across Renaissance Italy, the concept of the female artist was problematic for several reasons. To begin with, women were thought incapable of true invention due to a lack of creative initiative, prejudicing society against the very *possibility* of female artists. As multiple scholars have pointed out, this ideology originated in antiquity with Aristotle's ideas about reproduction.[121] Aristotle claimed that women have no active role in conception, functioning only as receptive vessels to incubate the children produced exclusively through male semen. By extension of their biology, women held little capacity for *artistic* invention. The female artist was a literal oxymoron.[122] Boccaccio explicitly laid out the change in his biography of Irene, a painter from Ancient Greece whose "achievements were worthy of some praise, for art is very much alien to the mind of women, and these things cannot be accomplished without a great deal of talent, which in women is usually very scarce."[123]

Also problematic was that the society built upon these beliefs made art and almost all other trades logistically impossible for women to practice.[124] Lower-class women were more likely to work out of necessity, but only the most menial jobs were available, such as wet-nurse or washerwoman. In the Late Renaissance, guilds presided over trades, and since women were excluded from these guilds, they were limited to the work available within the domestic sphere.

[121] See Chapter Three in Fredrika Herman Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 230.
[122] Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 230.
[123] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 161.
[124] In previous centuries, women were most likely to take up artistic pursuits in convents. The practice continued to a smaller extent in the 1500s. See Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 230.

Obviously, women of low status would not have had the finances to hire a tutor nor the time to take up a hobby so immaterial as painting (or any other form of art-making). Wealthier women, on the other hand, had the means and leisure time to cultivate skills such as painting. Being an accomplished lady of society, however, did not often manifest in professional careers.[125] The most probable background of a female artist was, by far, to be a daughter or wife in the household of a male artist. Unsurprisingly, Artemisia Gentileschi and Elisabetta Sirani, two of the most successful female artists of the Italian Renaissance, both had artist fathers.

Other forces working against women besides guilds were ideological, social, educational, and professional: in other words, their inability to attend academies, find access to nude models, or secure apprenticeships under working artists.[126] As a result of these ideological and practical circumstances female artists were few and far between—and yet, some forty women were documented by contemporary male authors as working in the visual arts in sixteenth-century Italy.[127] This seemingly small number was nevertheless unprecedented and demonstrates a new, albeit niche, market for women artists in early modern society, as well as the male author's interest in acknowledging as much in his writing. In the seventeenth century, the progressive city of Bologna alone housed an estimated twenty-five women working as artists—one of whom was the young Sirani.[128]

Women who did manage to launch careers as artists met further limitations. Indeed, the belief that women were uninventive by nature persisted in the types of works that they typically produced—namely portraits. Bohn explains this trend in the following way:

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[125] A notable exception being Sofonisba Anguissola, who came from a noble family and was raised by a father with unusually liberal ideas about women's education, supposedly inspired by Castiglione's *Courtier*. See Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 231.
[126] Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 229.
[127] Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 1; Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 231.
[128] Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 236.

> . . . portraiture was the most appropriate art form for women artists, since portraits were allegedly replications of nature, rather than true inventions. This specialization was also favored for women by social constraints, since women could paint portraits in private, thereby avoiding the public spaces inhabited by men. These factors contributed to the high frequency of specializations in portraiture by women artists for centuries.[129]

The same restrictive propriety is reflected in the female portraitists' primarily female patrons.[130] Similarly, lack of access to models in the academies inspired women to practice self-portraiture.[131]

These cultural predispositions cast Gentileschi and Sirani in an especially impressive light, for both took paths untrodden. Sirani's pieces, for example, were commissioned primarily by male patrons.[132] Most significant for this study, however, is that after starting out in the most "conventional" fashion by inheriting their trades from their fathers, both women became true masters of their professions by pursuing the prestigious genre of history painting. The prestige of the genre emanated from the learning required of both patron and artist: both had to be familiar with mythological and religious narratives. The two *virtuose* bring fresh insight and evident erudition to the trope of classical heroines.

The *Virtuosa*: Gendering Virtue and Skill

When women such as Sirani and Gentileschi achieved fame and recognition as artists, their contemporaries were confused. Their achievements did not cohere to the cultural model of feminine success. The "modern artist" was a concept formed in Cinquecento Italy and realized in Vasari's iconic *Lives*, that conflated masculine moral virtue (*virtù*) with artistic skill. For Vasari,

[129] Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 231.
[130] Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 238. Needless to say, these patrons were not volunteering to be nude models for the artists.
[131] Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 230. Still lifes of flowers was another popular genre for female artists, illustrating the same "house-bound" limitations of portrait artists.
[132] Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 240.

the *virtuoso's* talent was an external manifestation of his innate goodness.[133] As the previous two chapters have shown, virtue (whether in Latin or the vernacular) was highly gendered, so the concept of a female equivalent embodied in the *virtuosa* could not *really* be equivalent. This theological obstacle returns us to the problem of the oxymoron: "the 'feminine' virtues desired of one were the opposite of the 'masculine' virtues expected of the other. Woman, by reason of being female, should be silent, passive, and private. But if the *virtuosa* acted in accordance with these standards, she could not fully engage in a profession that was all about expression and public exposure."[134] Jacobs suggests that the cultural response to the conundrum was twofold: definitions of "stylistic virtuosity" were bisected to fit the sex of the artist, and the female artist was construed as an exception to her gender. The primary method used to enforce these distinctions was male-authored public discourse.

One strand of this public discourse emphasized ideal femininity. In poems, treatises, biographies, and letters praising female artists, male authors frequently stress qualities such as piety, physical beauty, pleasing manners, and aptitude for running a household—perhaps even more often than they are mentioned in conjunction with artistic abilities.[135] In another, sometimes overlapping, discourse, male authors focused on how woman artists transcended their gender to achieve masculine feats. Having risen through the ranks of the female sphere by exemplifying ideal feminine virtue, these select few rose further to the superior masculine sphere. Indeed, the most lavish flattery bestowed on a *virtuosa* was not an appeal to her conventionally-feminine virtue, but to her masculinity. Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), greatly influenced by Plutarch, divided the discourse to apply to two different types of women.[136] The tropes of the former (obedient

[133] Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 3.
[134] Jacobs, *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa*, 4.
[135] Jacobs, 3.
[136] Jacobs, 11.

daughter, loyal wife, devoted mother) exhibited "feminine" virtue while the trope of the *virtuosa* exhibited "womanly" virtue. Tasso's split framework acknowledged the existence of unconventional, remarkable women such as artists, while still maintaining the gendered hierarchy of masculine supremacy.

Elisabetta Sirani's biographer and contemporary, Carlo Cesare Malvasia (1616-1693), epitomized this dual approach in *Felsina pittrice* (1678), a compendium of biographies about Bolognese artists of the Renaissance. In the joint biography of Elisabetta and her father, Giovanni Andrea Sirani, Malvasia praises the daughter's "extraordinary virtue, incomparable humility, ineffable modesty, [and] inimitable goodness."[137] In addition to establishing her traditional feminine qualities, however, he also exalts Sirani above the city's other female artists for her triumph over the "timidity and polish typical of the weaker sex," instead showing herself "to be brave and spirited, working in a style that had *virility and greatness*, surpassing in the resoluteness and ferocity, I would almost say, the father, who in every manner was a great man" [emphasis added].[138] He goes on to say that through such bold and "virile" technique, she "virtually acquired the male sex."[139] A new, third gender was being implemented to put nonconforming women in their place. Having escaped the traditionally feminine role, a new one had to be created in an attempt to maintain some control over female behavior and thus prevent the need for men to compete for traditionally masculine roles.

137 Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, trans. Julia K. Dabbs, in Julia K. Dabbs, *Life Stories of Women Artists, 1550-1800: An Anthology* (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 127.
138 Malvasia *Felsina Pittrice*, 127.
139 Bohn, "From Oxymoron," 240.

Classical Heroines and Gender-Fluid Discourse

The cultural challenges posed by women like Sirani and Gentileschi are also present in their choice of subjects. Classical heroines also did not fit comfortably within established gender binaries, often demonstrating perplexing "virility" in their own endeavors. I do not mean to suggest that Malvasia, or any other writer of the Seicento, set the precedent for this kind of gender-inverting discourse. Boccaccio did not establish the discursive field either; his biographies from the Trecento demonstrate a centuries-old tradition. Thus, recounting how Penthesilea, legendary Queen of the Amazons, fought valiantly in the Trojan War, killing many enemies before falling herself, he concludes:

> Some may be surprised by the fact that women, no matter how armed, dared to fight against men. However, surprise will cease if we think of the fact that custom had changed their nature, so that Penthesilea and women like her were *much more manly in arms than those who were made men by Nature* but were then changed into women or helmeted hares by idleness and love of pleasure [emphasis added].[140]

Boccaccio abandons purely biological definitions of sex, instead equating femininity with feeble bodies and self-indulgent dispositions, while equating masculinity with physical aptitude and self-discipline. In Guido Guarino's introduction to his translation of *On Famous Women*, he expounds on how Boccaccio's writing reveals a confused mixture of medieval and Renaissance attitudes toward gender:

> To lavish praise on a woman, Boccaccio can think of no better adjective than 'manly,' and his greatest condemnation of sluggish and insignificant men is to call them women. Yet he has taken a step forward, for he grants them the right of independent will and action...often exhort[ing] them to lay aside the traditional tasks of women and turn their minds and energies towards greatness of thoughts and action.[141]

[140] Boccaccio, *On Famous Women*, 66.
[141] Guido A. Guarino, Introduction to *On Famous Women*, by Giovanni Boccaccio, trans Guido A. Guarino, 2nd revised ed. (New York: Italica Press, 2011).

But is he really exhorting them? As Franklin has persuasively argued, Boccaccio is not empowering contemporary women through his praise of those in the past, but rather severing his contemporaries from the ancients.[142] He is differentiating Amazons from real, modern women by underlining how the surprise the reader inevitably feels at Penthesilea's feats can be calmed by the fact that "custom had changed their nature." Amazons were even said to cut a breast off to better operate a bow—a testament to their more literal masculinity (and a trend seriously unlikely resurface). Only through extenuating circumstances, such as a society made entirely of militant, female citizens, would women ever become "manly in arms." The only great thoughts and actions that Boccaccio endorses must fit within the strictures appropriate to the female sex.

Restoring Female Heroism – Lucretia

Gentileschi's earliest *Lucretia* is famous for its dramatic departure from the fashionable trope of erotic suicide **[Fig. 27]**. It is less refined than much of her other work, but this raw quality makes the image powerful. Sitting upright on the edge of her bed, rather than slumping feebly or sensuously reclining, Lucretia is distressed yet alert. She throws her head back, staring upwards questioningly, her gaze focused, with wrinkled forehead and furrowed brow—as if demanding God's attention. Lucretia does not seem to seek His strength, but His wisdom, and perhaps, His forgiveness. The way she grasps her breast firmly emphasizes her own tangibility while a prominent, powerful right leg steadies her. The tension visibly running through her body conveys active inner turmoil as well as the capacity for the brute force that the viewer knows she must ultimately use.

[142] Franklin, *Boccaccio's Heroines*, 143.

Garrard finds the "idiosyncratic nature" of Gentileschi's interpretation in two defining characteristics. First, that Lucretia has not yet inflicted the fatal wound, and neither is she in the process of doing so. Second, she holds her breast in a way that Garrard believes to be evocative of breastfeeding.[143] The latter interpretation is unconvincing; I posit instead that she is accentuating her corporeal materiality and femininity, raising the tension of the scene, and most practically, preparing the target for imminent attack. She holds her left breast because that is where her heart is located, its position reinforced by the knife she clenches in her left fist.[144] Garrard is correct, however, about the narrative moment Gentileschi has chosen, for it is indeed significant that Lucretia is so alive in this image, conveying unexpected vitality. Boccaccio's weepy, wrought Lucretia is nowhere to be found.

Even more striking, I would argue, is how Gentileschi subverts eroticism without distancing Lucretia from her sexual assault. Indeed, her appearance requires the viewer to experience the narrative in a new way, including the ordeal that inspires this moment's suicidal contemplation. Lucretia's disheveled clothing and exposed flesh invite the viewer to imagine how her bodice was ripped open and the hem pushed up above her knee during her rape. Yet, these body parts do not invite the male gaze, nor do the overt references to sex titillate. This figure, unlike her predecessors, is a fighter. Her sturdy body and evident mental acuity remind us that in reality, a woman is not so easily conquered as Cambiaso's or Titian's Lucretia; that in reality, rape is often a violent, graceless, frantic violation of a person fully capable of clawing, kicking, and screaming.

[143] Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 229-30.
[144] Gentileschi's *Lucretia* is the only female figure I discuss in this study who holds the weapon in her left hand, as opposed to her right.

It would be negligent to continue without acknowledging Gentileschi's own history with sexual violence. As a teenager, she had been raped by Agostino Tassi, a Roman colleague and friend of her father's. The proceedings after this are rather convoluted, complicated further by a pattern of art historians' anachronistic readings, but in short, Orazio Gentileschi took Tassi to trial for deflowering his daughter.[145] Initially, Gentileschi sought to marry his daughter to Tassi, a common form of consolation that benefited the abused girl's reputation; when he refused, the trial ended in a sentencing that was never carried out, and Artemisia was quickly married off to another man. This episode in the young artist's life has since tended to define it, coloring and overshadowing all aspects of her career as an artist.[146] I do not intend to make this same mistake, yet the relevance of this experience to the subject of Lucretia's suicide is too profound to ignore. Gentileschi constructs the scene with depth and empathy, emphasizing Lucretia's tactility and humanity rather than her virtue or sexuality. Regardless of whether the artist drew directly from her own experience or not, she instructs the viewer that Lucretia's rape is not abstract, distant, or mythological. Rape is a timeless crime that produces victims and has consequences, no less relatable in the seventeenth century than it was in antiquity.[147] The baroque style bolsters the pictorial immediacy, but Gentileschi's attention to physical details also emphasize the humanity in tragedy and suffering.

[145] Elizabeth S. Cohen, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 31, no. 1 (2000), 49.
[146] Cohen describes this phenomenon compellingly in the article cited above, "The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History." She first analyzes the misguided historiography on Gentileschi, before turning to the records of the rape trial themselves in an effort to restore appropriate seventeenth-century perspectives to the event.
[147] For a discussion of rape as trauma, see: Patricia A. Frazier and Eugene Borgida, "Rape Trauma Syndrome: A Review of Case Law and Psychological Research," *Law and Human Behavior* 16, no. 3 (1992): 293–311.

Gentileschi replicates the humanizing process with other classical heroines; most pertinent to this study is Judith. The second of two quite similar versions of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* was completed within a year of *Lucretia*, in 1620 or 1621 **[Fig. 28]**.[148] Gentileschi's representation owes its aura of baroque drama to Caravaggio's *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, painted a few decades prior **[Fig. 29]**.[149] But Gentileschi's Judith, like her Lucretia and unlike Caravaggio's Judith, is full-figured and substantial, present in the flesh. She is somewhat more feminine than Lucretia: Gentileschi was probably inspired by the Old Testament source material in which Judith seduces the general with her beauty and finery. Yet Gentileschi does not adhere to the beauty standards of the day (as Caravaggio's figure does). Judith's sumptuous sleeves are bunched up inelegantly around her elbows for the practical purpose of holding and cutting off a large man's head. Her expression is resolute and focused rather than charmingly confused like Caravaggio's Judith. Blood spurts forcefully out of the neck of each Holofernes, but Gentileschi amplifies the gore with rivulets of blood streaming from his body into all the little creases of the bedclothes underneath. The scene is further intensified by this Judith's more realistic, forceful handling of the sword, not to mention her and her maid's physical proximity to their victim, the two women nearly climbing on top of him and laboring to hold him down. In contrast, Caravaggio's Judith and maid stand a respectful distance from their victim, as if afraid to come into contact with his body or his blood, as Judith slices through Holofernes's neck like butter. Caravaggio's Judith has an uncomprehending yet repulsed expression, which, together with her physical removal from the victim, would make more sense if her arms were at her sides as she watched someone else take action.

[148] See Chapter 5 of Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, esp. 321-24.
[149] See Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, 290-91; Shannon N. Pritchard, "A Print Source for Caravaggio's 'Judith Beheading Holofernes,'" *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 34, no. 4 (2015): 23–30.

There is a great deal more to be said about two such complex paintings, but the subject is beyond the scope of this project (and done very thoroughly elsewhere), so I conclude this section with the significance of Artemisia's *Judith* to her *Lucretia* and to the extended corpus of classical heroines. To begin with, Gentileschi illustrates that there is more than one means of visually subverting eroticism, for Judith's beauty is a trap for the viewer just as it was for the foolish Holofernes. Simultaneously, Artemisia conveys how she can also apply the *same* visual tools to different figures to create a unifying sense of heroism and autonomy while still maintaining their individuality. These visual tools consist of naturalized figures with heroic proportions rather than inhuman confections, with idealized proportions: thus Gentileschi creates a Baroque vocabulary of female agency, redefining what feminine bodies look like and of what they are capable. Gentileschi also develops a potent emotional tenor in these images: affect pours from the figures, in ways both nuanced and eminently relatable. In short, Gentileschi bestows these subjects with authenticity rather than the superficiality preferred by her predecessors.

Elisabetta Sirani accomplishes a similar revision in her painting of *Timoclea* (1659) **[Fig. 30]**. The esoteric subject derives from Plutarch's *Lives*, which tells of a Thracian captain's rape of a respected Theban woman, Timoclea.[150] After the attack, Timoclea finds an opportunity to push her assailant down into her well and then finishes the job by dropping rocks on top of him. Sirani's portrait of the victim-turned-victor is fierce and determined, shown exacting her revenge. Her clothes and her hair are not disheveled, that is to say, Sirani eschews the typical iconographic traits of assaulted women. Timoclea's anger at the violation is readily apparent: the traumatic affect is conveyed through *her* action and expression rather than physical evidence of the rapist's actions. The captain, on the other hand, is depicted at the very instant when he loses balance, beginning to

[150] Bohn, "Antique Heroines," 63.

fall head-first into the well as a result of Timoclea's murderous shove. His flailing pose is almost comical as he is immediately transformed into the one ultimately conquered and humiliated. Timoclea pushes him down with one hand on his knee and the other on his thigh: a reversal of the rapist's hands on his victim's body. The blocking of the figures is unrealistic, given that she would probably not have been able to initiate the original push and then immediately give him a second push mid-fall, but it allows the defeated rapist to be in the most climactic, ridiculous pose while, by contrast, the victor's physical contact demonstrates her instigation, allowing her to assume the most heroic, active pose. Timoclea claims revenge for her rape, choosing to retaliate by murdering her abuser. It is crucial that Sirani depicts this as a justified choice.

We can think of Sirani's Timoclea as a foil to Gentileschi's Lucretia. Both exhibit powerful emotion and physical agency, though they make different choices about directing their violent retribution. Furthermore, Timoclea's narrative combines Lucretia's assault with Judith's solution, rape with revenge. Indeed, this painting is a pendant to a painting of Judith in a similarly unique scene, presenting the head of Holofernes to her people back in the village. [151] According to Bohn, Sirani's is the only known depiction of Timoclea by an Italian painter; this singularity speaks to the subject's and, vicariously, the artist's feminine agency. Sirani echoes this symbolic display in another way, broadcasting her own agency in the form of a prominent signature engraved into the rock of the well.

Reinventing the Narrative – Portia

Sirani's works have been described as "quietly feminist" in relation to Gentileschi's, and not entirely without reason—but *Portia Wounding her Thigh*, like *Timoclea*, is hardly quiet.

[151] Bohn, "Antique Heroines," 60-62.

Rather, Sirani once again features a heroine of the same heroic caliber as Artemisia's *Lucretia* **[Fig. 31]**.[152] Portia was a young Roman noblewoman of the first century BC, daughter of Cato the Younger and wife of Marcus Junius Brutus (Julius Caesar's most famous assassin). Here, Portia has just stabbed herself in the leg to demonstrate to her husband that she can withstand the pain if tortured and can therefore be trusted to learn his secrets. She looks at the fresh wound unflinchingly, with a subtly satisfied expression. This direct engagement with the violent action communicates composed intentionality and control over her own body.

Let us think back to Guercino's *Cato*, and the qualities instilled in the figure **[Fig. 12]**. In Sirani's depiction of Cato's daughter, Portia has evidently inherited her father's stoical character, channeling his agency, integrity, and sense of purpose. Unlike Gentileschi, who removes all ornamentation to keep the focus on Lucretia's emotional state, Sirani bedecks Portia with sumptuous fabrics and jewels. Portia's regal and unapologetically feminine appearance together with her composure and evident resilience combine to form a truly commanding portrait of female autonomy; the daughter of a great republican icon becomes a queen. Despite the figure's beauty and glamour, she does not invite the male gaze. Portia is fully in control of her body and her sexual allure, that control enhanced by her leg propped matter-of-factly up on a chair, skirts pulled up to expose her thigh.

The juxtaposition of the demure figures in the background is no accident. Four women in plain clothing attend to domestic tasks, immersed in their work and paying no attention to Portia, who pays no attention to the servants in return. Portia is immersed in a more dramatic task.[153] The separation of the two groups of women emphasizes the different worlds in which they reside—

[152] Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 6.
[153] Bohn, "Antique Heroines," 68.

theirs quotidian and conventionally feminine, hers daring, exciting, momentous (recalling Tasso's distinction between the "feminine" and the "womanly"). This difference suggests that she has successfully entered the masculine arena as she sought to do, now standing with the men as they plot the most notorious assassination in western history. It is crucial that Sirani has not dampened Portia's femininity, but rather heightened it, demonstrating that women can possess "masculine" virtue without being masculine themselves. Women do not need to inhabit the form of an Amazon to display courage, bodily agency, and violence against themselves and others.

It is crucial we take into consideration that Portia was Cato's daughter—Cato is a key figure in this study—and that according to some sources, Portia, like Cato, eventually committed suicide.[154] The legend goes that upon hearing about the death of her husband Brutus in battle, she was so overcome with grief that friends and family became concerned for her safety. They kept watch over her, but she was so desperate to end her life that she took hot coals from the fire and swallowed them. Despite the implausibility of such a method, the story was well-suited to the theatrical baroque style. Guido Reni, so transparently fond of suicidal female subjects, simply plugged Portia into his formula for damsels in distress **[Fig. 32]**.[155] The resulting image is nearly interchangeable with his others, Portia is recognizable only because she reaches into a dish of embers. Reni's Portia has creamy skin, a low-cut dress with a touch of cleavage, and an expression of helplessness. Sirani's and Reni's representations of Portia are irreconcilable. It is interesting, however, that both artists depict the moment of her self-harm for her husband's sake. The difference is that Reni's image of suicide depicts Portia's sacrifice, defeat, and dependence on her

[154] Ancient sources disagree on the manner of her death. Valerius Maximus (very widely disseminated in the Cinquecento) and Cassius Dio record that Portia committed suicide by eating hot coals. Plutarch, on the other hand, is skeptical and a surviving letter from Cicero to Brutus after her death contains no reference to suicide.
[155] Bohn, "Antique Heroines," 68.

husband, while Sirani's image of the wounded thigh reveals Portia's fortitude, self-confidence, audacity, and nonconformity. The result is a new image of female heroism.

Reframing the Legacy – Cleopatra

Portia's was not the only narrative that Sirani reclaimed, and certainly not the most familiar. Cleopatra—the most frequently eroticized figure in this study and one nearly always depicted within the context of her suicide—is another example. Sirani's painting of Cleopatra from the 1660s, created shortly before *Portia Wounding Her Thigh*, was barely recognizable to contemporary viewers as the famous Queen of Egypt, so completely distinct is she from the canon of Cleopatra **[Fig. 33]**. Sirani's Cleopatra is dressed in sumptuous fabrics, with the greatest modesty: her chest is covered all the way to her collarbone, her sleeves are long, and her shoulders are wrapped in a large peach-colored shawl. Even her hair is covered, with the exception of a few stray golden wisps. There are no snakes in sight. Instead of portraying Cleopatra's suicide, Sirani has chosen to illustrate the climax of another legendary story originally recorded by Pliny the Elder.[156] Cleopatra had devised a bet with Marc Antony that she could have a feast prepared more lavish and costly than any he had ever seen. After serving a magnificent meal, though not the *most* magnificent Antony had ever seen, Cleopatra ordered that the dessert be brought out. She was served a single cup of vinegar in which she promptly dropped one of the pearls hanging from her ears, both allegedly the two biggest in the world. The massive, priceless pearl quickly dissolved and she drank its remains, instantly winning the bet.

Sirani depicts the moment in which Cleopatra dangles the pearl daintily above a dish of vinegar, recalling the plethora of other Cleopatra images set in mid-action, with snakes poised to

156 Pliny. *Natural History, Volume III: Books 8-11*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 353 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940) Book IX, p. 244-245.

strike. Cleopatra looks off to our left with a small smile, staring in a way that suggests she is looking at Marc Antony, taunting him on the cusp of her victory. She exudes a steady calm combined with an air of superiority, whether intended to be playful or aggressive, it is difficult to say. What *is* certain is that Cleopatra is presented as a woman whose wit rivals her fabulous wealth. Sirani communicates all this with great subtlety, relying on the viewer's erudition to recognize the reference.

Perhaps there is an even larger message here. Cleopatra had been demonized off and on for centuries due to her brazen affairs with two of the biggest names in ancient history, exerting enormous influence over her lovers while simultaneously ruling a kingdom of her own. Cleopatra was an unusually threatening figure because she combined seduction, intelligence, and determination to become one of the most powerful women in history.[157] These attributes are what made her a desirable artistic target for eroticization and negation of agency. Sirani takes that same classical subject and revives all of the empowering (dangerous) qualities that define her. For over a century, Cleopatra was visually defined by how she died, but Sirani defines her by how she lived: competitively, with extravagance and ingenuity.

One earlier example of a female-authored *Cleopatra* is extant. It was painted by Lavinia Fontana, another Bolognese artist, around the turn of the seventeenth-century **[Fig. 34]**. Malvasia says of Fontana that, "even in her perfect work [she] never lost a certain timidity and polish typical of the weaker sex."[158] He asserts this in comparison to Sirani's evidently transcendent painterly virility. Regardless of Fontana's allegedly feminine painting style, her rendition of Cleopatra is undeniably masculine. The figure is not eroticized, like Sirani's, but unlike Sirani's, neither is she traditionally feminine. Cleopatra is dressed in an outfit resembling military garb, with only her

[157] See Chapter Two of this study: p. 42-44, 47.
[158] Malvasia, *Felsina Pittrice*, 127.

hands and part of her face exposed. The garments are loose and boxy, revealing only the faintest hint of breasts underneath. She wears a bejeweled, helmet-like hat as a symbol of her royal status. Most impressive is Cleopatra's even gaze at the snake before her. They seem to be sizing one another up: Cleopatra conveys mild interest and unwavering composure. Even though Fontana chooses to return to the subject of Cleopatra's suicide, she demonstrates a re-evaluation of the event. Cleopatra is distanced from eroticism in a way that distances herself from her gender altogether. We imagine that this Cleopatra is a warrior, a self-possessed leader, and a complex historical figure whom we will never know.

Consider the path from Reni's archetypal *Cleopatras*, to Sirani's, to Fontana's: each approach is entirely distinct and yet each portrays the same figure. Sirani's and Fontana's *Cleopatras* are similarly distinct from Gentileschi's *Lucretia*, crystallizing the variety of approaches used by female painters as well as the individuality they restored to historical figures who had become artistically interchangeable. The *virtuose's* respective treatments of female suicide establish that there was not some singular, "feminine" response to the dominant and comparatively homogenized "masculine" artistic model. The works discussed in this chapter are not exceptional solely because they were painted by women, for it was not by virtue of their gender, but their interpretive skills, artistic prowess, and untapped perspectives that their subjects remain exceptional amidst the sea of female suicides.

Conclusion: Women as Men…as Women

Societies seek to define the human experience, and societies in Renaissance Italy turned to gender to do that. Gender constructs in the Renaissance gave both men and women a sense of

identity, a sense that they belonged somewhere and that there was at least some type of order in a chaotic, changing world. Unsurprisingly, those favored by that system were more compelled to embrace it and those not favored were more compelled to question it. Italy's early female artists, such as Elisabetta Sirani and Artemisia Gentileschi were, consciously or not, doing just that with visual subtext. I do not mean to imply that Gentileschi and Sirani were activists or radical feminists by modern standards, rather that they imprinted their own experiences of an acutely gender-conscious historical moment onto their depicted historical women. Women such as these brought fresh perspectives to a subject that had begun to stagnate, creating invaluable works of art that document the complexities of gender and suicide in a different time. Sirani and Gentileschi return an authentic sense of human experience to this corpus through empathetic portrayals of classical female suicides, while simultaneously imbuing them with distinctly contemporary dilemmas, bridging the gap between antiquity and the Renaissance. They foreshadow the kind of approach that we now hope to take in bridging the gap to *their* historical moment.

Conclusion

By now, I trust that the ways in which images of female suicide were both eroticized and stereotypically feminized is clear. What perhaps remains unclear, is how such transformations reflect pivotal ideologies of early modern culture. At the heart of the matter is how visualizations of female exemplarity were used to retroactively define gender roles for women in the present by undermining legendary women of the past. Exemplars of virtue such as Lucretia were visually weakened, allowing them to be eroticized, which in turn allowed them to be objectified. With what effect? Objects cannot be true heroes, and if there are no female heroes, then men are reassured of their heroic masculinity and women have nothing threatening to which they can aspire. Furthermore, let us not forget that masculinity was an increasingly elusive and fragile construct during this period.[159] When suicide came to symbolize feminine deficiency and subordination, classical male suicide became a more problematic subject. The extreme example of emasculation and vice was Judas; Cato was a more masculine, heroic figure, though also more complex, whose actions both meshed and clashed with late Renaissance values. If the definition of manhood was becoming more and more ambiguous, then what better reason to at least define womanhood, or rather, to define what was *not* masculine. Following this logic, the more constricted and removed the notions of ideal women were from notions of ideal men, the more freedom men had in their own behavior. Othering women was an attempt to restore social order or, perhaps, to understand one's own confusion.[160]

Gentileschi's and Sirani's works help restore balance to a one-sided artistic canon, just as they restore agency to their subjects. Male contemporaries, and society at large, did not often

[159] Rocke, "Gender and Sexual Culture in Renaissance Italy," 50; Strocchia "Gender and Rites of Honour," 59-60.
[160] Dickey, "Damsels in Distress," 54.

acknowledge the necessity for balance in a system composed of binaries. Referring to classical heroines and the female artists who painted them as "manly" was a way to recognize their worth; they plugged female success (of both virtue and skill) into the existing formula for male success, thus defining the female exemplar's and the virtuosa's value in masculine terms. Masculinizing impressive women backfires, however, because it acknowledges overlap between the genders—something difficult to explain in a binary system. The corpus of images in Chapter 3 effectively reclaims women's ownership of their own value by subverting gendered virtue. Classical heroines and *virtuose* do not rise up above the traditional feminine sphere, existing only in some superior-to-women-but-inferior-to-men limbo; instead, they simply untether heroic qualities from gender constructs, suggesting that the two forms of identity exist on different planes.

In reclaiming access to the entire spectrum of virtue (as patron, artist, and viewer understood it), *virtuose* redefined what it meant to be a woman—they may have only made a ripple in contemporary society, but they effected three other critical outcomes. First, their pioneering careers inspired proliferating female artists of the Seicento, many of whom Sirani trained herself. Second, they offered the contemporary viewers of these select works possible insights into the artificiality of gender constructs as well as empathy toward the timeless, genderless human condition. Third, artists like Elisabetta Sirani and Artemisia Gentileschi bequeathed profound implications for the study of gender and representation in art history today. Their works convey that suicidal female subjects were more complex than they had appeared in previous decades and that the sexualization and objectification of female heroism was not a foregone conclusion. Beauty was but one feature of figures who boast multiple, interwoven iconographies. Conversely, Sirani and Gentileschi also illustrate that female artists could produce works for patrons and the market that were as openly objectifying as any male artist's. Gender was a construction that women could

learn and participate in, just as they could subvert it, if they were astute and intelligent artists. With their suicidal heroines, Sirani and Gentileschi tap into the universal desire to carve out an identity within one's society, to define oneself and one's honor in relation to others—to question the right way to live, and to die.

Figures

Figure 1. Giotto, *Despair*. 1306, Fresco, 47.2 x 23.6 inches. Arena Chapel, Padua, Italy. Image Credit: ArtStor.

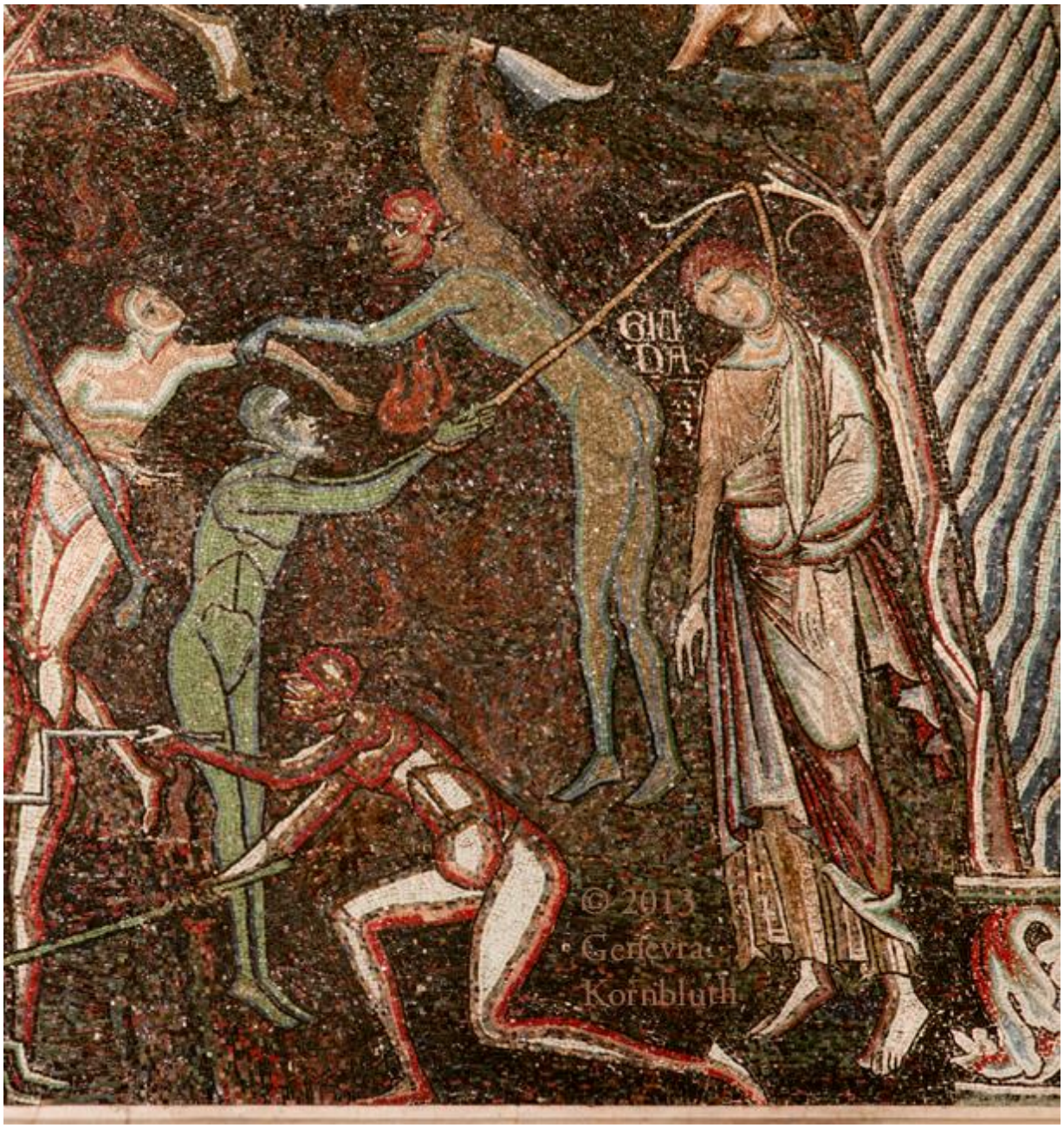

Figure 2. Artist Unknown, *Last Judgment* detail. Circa 1260-75, Mosaic Vault. Baptistry of San Giovanni, Florence.

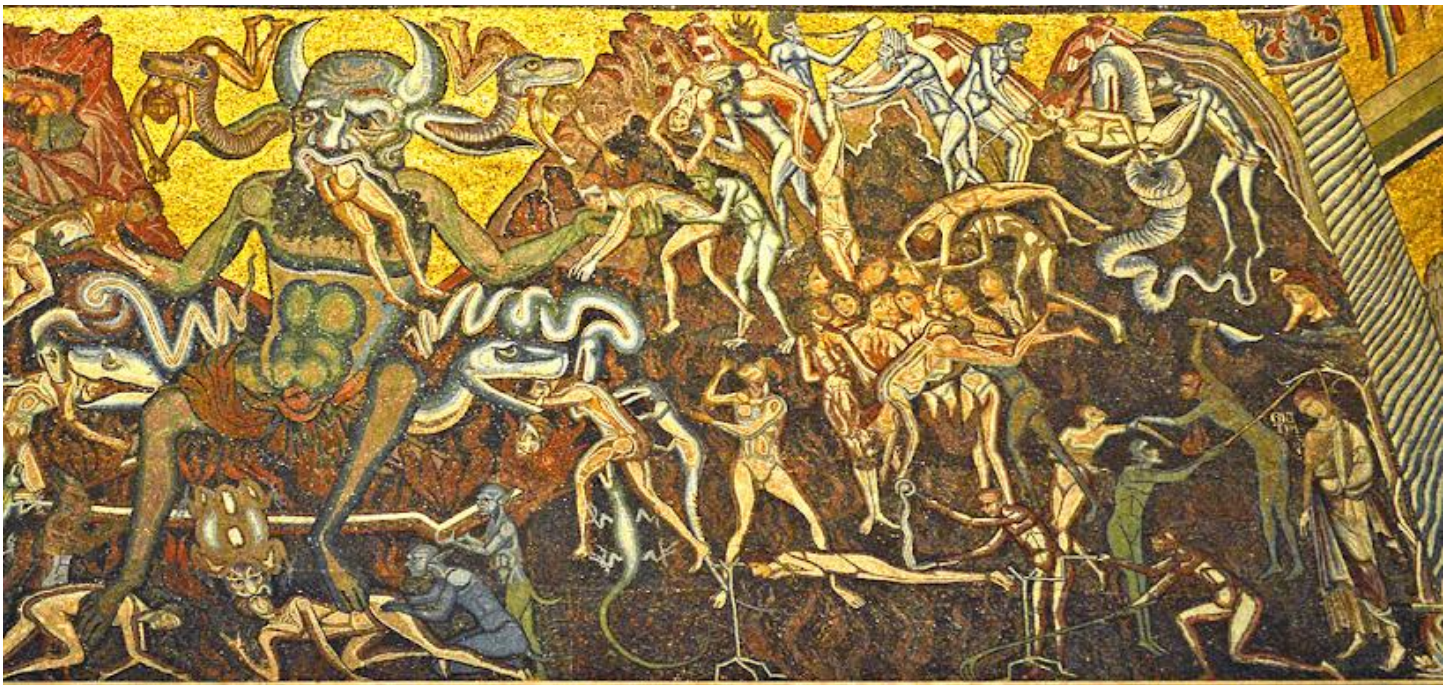

Figure 3. Larger detail of *Last Judgment* scene in San Giovanni Baptistry.

Figure 4. Giotto, *Judas's Betrayal*. Circa 1305, Fresco. Arena Chapel, Padua. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 5. Giotto, *Last Judgment* detail. Circa 1305, Fresco. Arena Chapel, Padua. Image Credit: Artstor.

Figure 6. Pietro Lorenzetti, *Death of Judas*. Circa 1310s, Fresco. San Francesco, Assisi. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 7. Giovanni Canavesio, *Suicide of Judas*. Circa 1492, Fresco. Chapel of Notre-Dame des Fontaines, La Brigue. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 8. Giovanni Canavesio, North wall. Circa 1492, Fresco. Chapel of Notre-Dame des Fontaines, La Brigue. Image Credit: Véronique Plesch, *Painter and Priest: Giovanni Canavesio's Visual Rhetoric and the Passion Cycle at La Brigue*, 167.

Figure 9. Giorgio Vasari, *Death of Judas (Despair)*. 1542, Fresco, 29.9 x 51.2 inches. Location unknown; ceiling dismantled and sold in fragments. Image Credit: DASE.laits.utexas.edu.

Figure 10. Giorgio Vasari, *Hope*. 1542, Fresco, Dimensions unknown. Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice. Image Credit: www.venetianheritage.eu.

Figure 11. Domenico Beccafumi, *Death of Cato*. Circa 1519-25, Fresco, 39.3 x 51.1 inches. Palazzo Bindi Sergardi, Siena. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

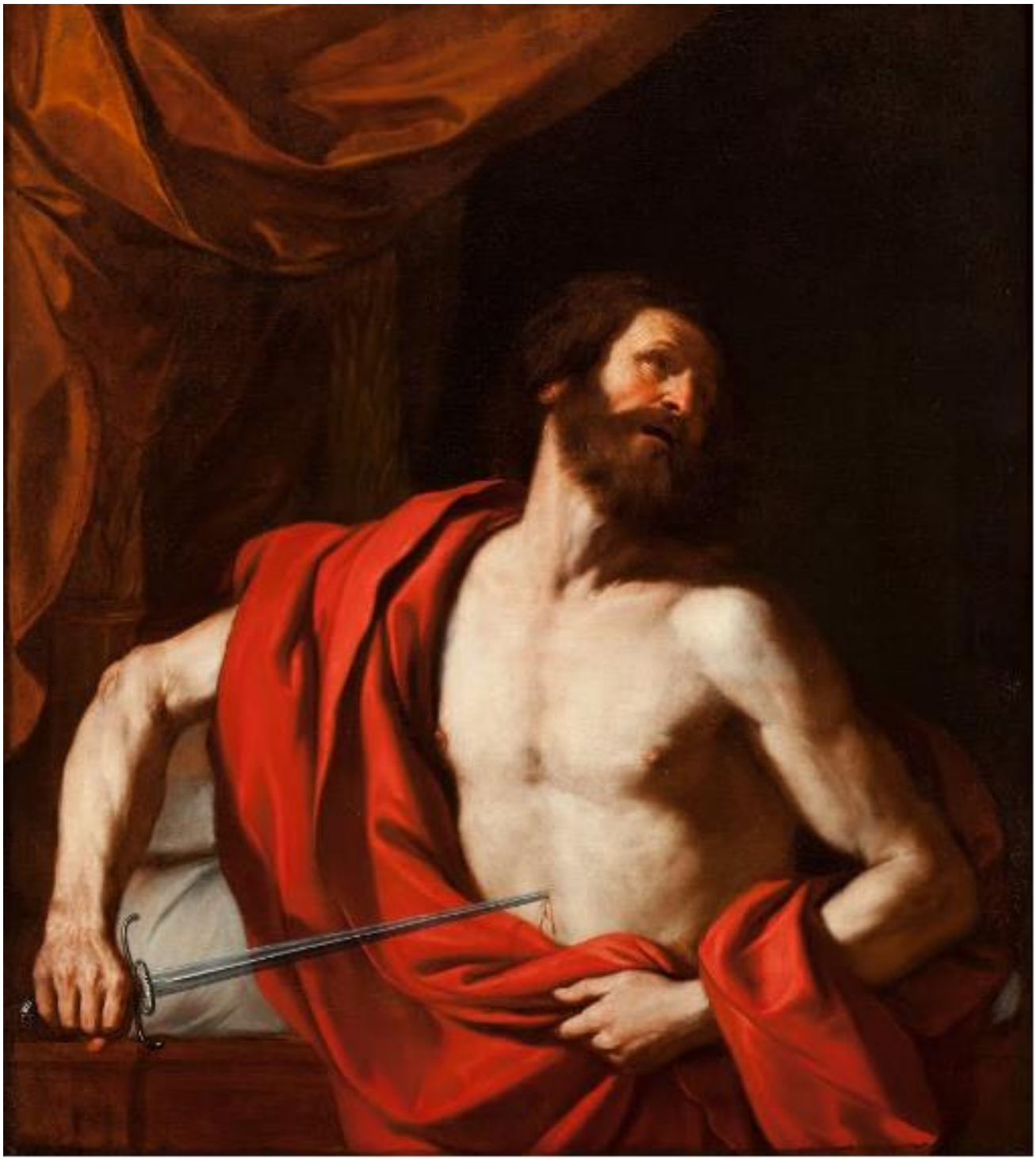

Figure 12. Guercino, *Death of Cato*. 1641, Oil on canvas. Strada Nuova Museum, Genoa. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 13. Daniele Crespi, *Death of Cato*. 1622, Oil on canvas, Dimensions unknown. Location unknown.

Figure 14. Sandro Botticelli, *The Tragedy of Lucretia Spalleria*. 1496-1504, Tempera on panel, 32 ¾ x 70 ¼ inches. Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 15. Sandro Botticelli, *The Story of the Roman Virginia Spalliera*. Circa 1492, Tempera on panel, 33.5 x 65 inches. Accademia Carrara, Bergamo. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 16. Andrea Mantegna, *Dido*. Circa 1505-1510, Distemper and gold on canvas, 25.7 x 12.4 inches. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 17. Artist unknown, *Lucretia*. Circa 1540, Maiolica. Museo Nazionale Medievale e Moderna, Arezzo. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 18. Giorgio Andreoli (after Marcantonio Raimondi), *Death of Dido*. 1522, Maiolica, 2 x 9 7/8 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 19. Marcantonio Raimondi (after Raphael), *Dido*. Circa 1510, Engraving, 6 5/16 x 5 1/16 inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 20. Raphael, *Lucretia*. 1508-1510, Pen and brown ink over black chalk, 15 5/8 x 11 ½ inches. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Image Credit: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 21. Francesco Xanto Avelli, *Cleopatra*. 1526-7, Maiolica, 10.62 inches. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Image Credit: Victoria and Albert Museum.

Figure 22. Workshop of Orazio Pompei, *Tall drug bottle with the death of Cleopatra*. Circa 1540-1550, Maiolica, 17 5/16 x 7 7/8 inches. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Image Credit: collection.corcoran.org (Corcoran Gallery disbanded, webpage now inactive).

Figure 23. Luca Cambiaso, *Lucretia*. Circa 1565, Oil on canvas, 65.5 x 35.5 inches. Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas. Image Credit: Blanton Museum of Art.

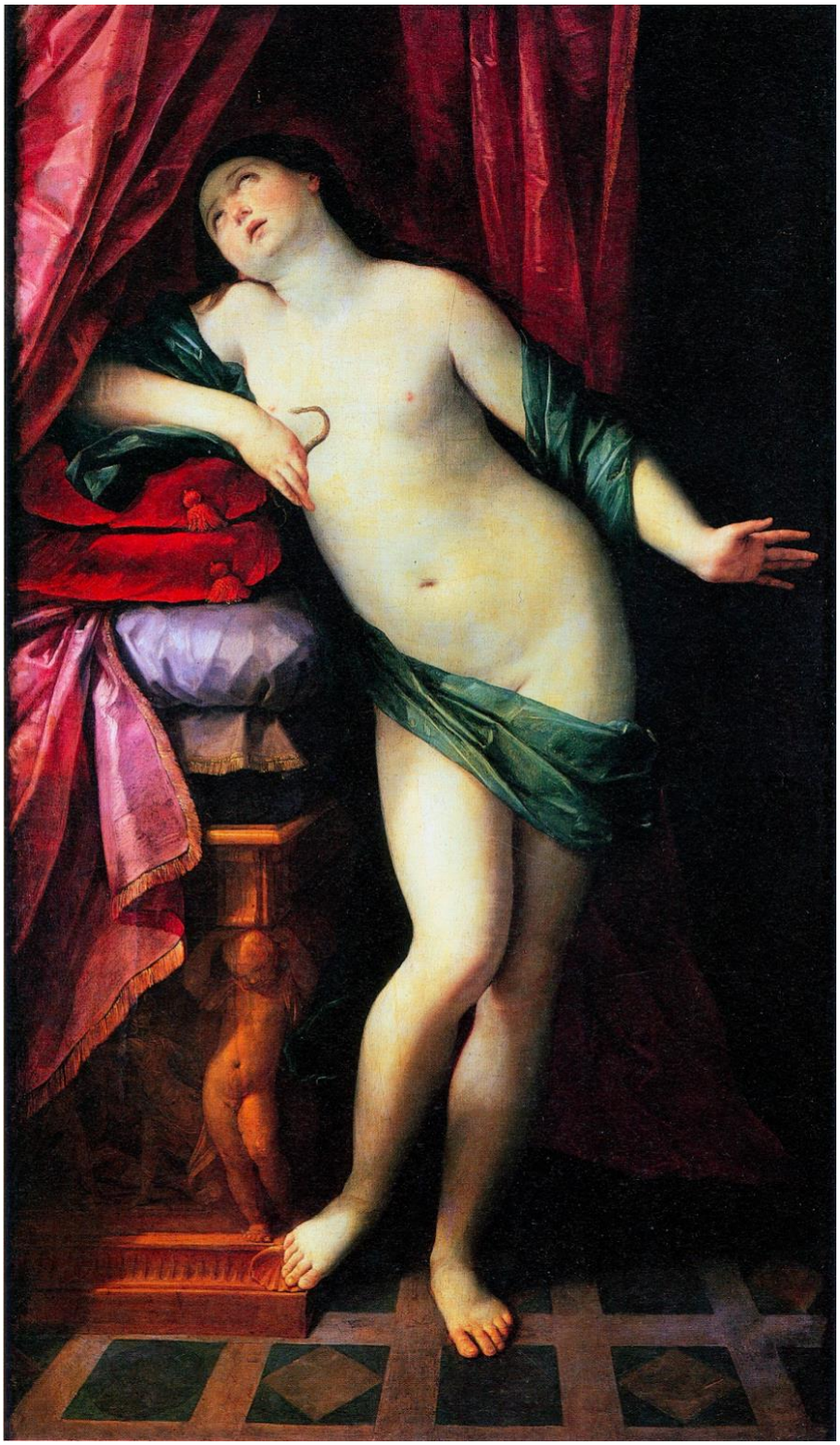

Figure 24. Guido Reni, *Cleopatra*. Circa 1625, Oil on canvas, 68.9 x 40.2 inches. Private collection. Image Credit: DASE.laits.utexas.edu

Figure 25. Guido Cagnacci, *Lucretia*. Circa 1660, Oil on canvas, Dimensions unknown. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 26. Titian, *Tarquin and Lucretia*. Circa 1571, Oil on canvas, 74.4 x 57 inches. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Image Credit: DASE.laits.utexas.edu.

Figure 27. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lucretia*. Circa 1621, Oil on canvas, 54 x 51 inches. Palazzo-Cattano-Adorno, Genoa. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 28. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*. 1620-21, Oil on canvas, 39.4 x 64 inches. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Image Credit: DASE.laits.utexas.edu.

Figure 29. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Circa 1598-1599, Oil on canvas, 57 x 77 inches. Galleria Nazionale d'arte Antica, Rome. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 30. Elisabetta Sirani, *Timoclea*. 1659, Oil on canvas, Dimensions unknown. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 31. Elisabetta Sirani, *Portia Wounding Her Thigh.* 1664, Oil on canvas, 39 ¾ x 54 ¾ in. Cassa di Risparmio Foundation, Bologna. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 32. Guido Reni, *Portia Eating Hot Coals*. 1625-26, Oil on canvas, Dimensions unknown. Durazzo-Pallavicini Collection, Genoa. Image Credit: Artnet.

Figure 33. Elisabetta Sirani, *Cleopatra*. 1662-63, Oil on canvas, 37 ¼ x 29 ¾ inches. Private Collection. Image Credit: ArtStor.

Figure 34. Lavinia Fontana, *Cleopatra*. 1585, Oil on canvas, Dimensions unknown. Galleria Spada, Rome. Image Credit: ArtStack.

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